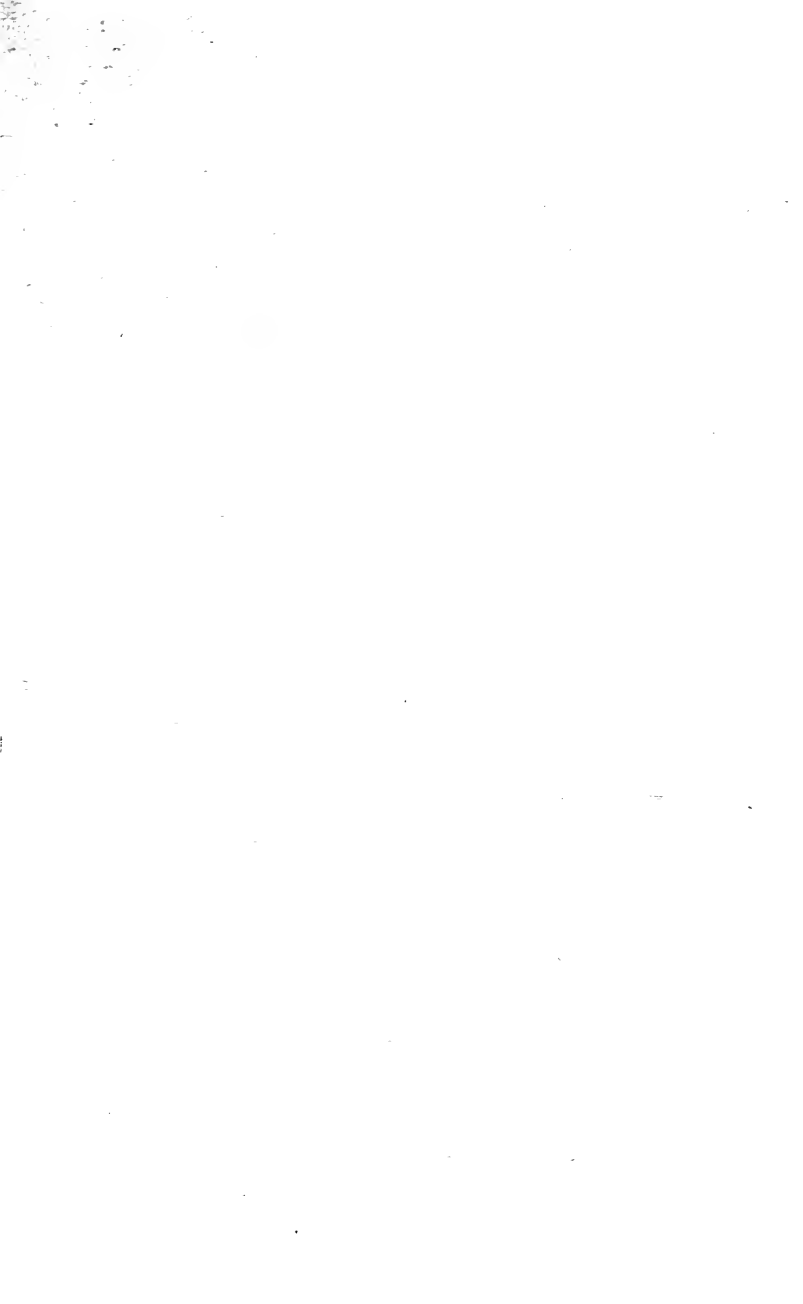






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HEAVILY HANDICAPPED

BY

GENIE HOLTZMEYER

AUTHOR OF "DAUGHTERS OF EVE," "MIZPAH," "HER OWN WAY."

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II.

LONDON :

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 8, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND

1882

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HEAVILY HANDICAPPED.

CHAPTER I.

MARRIAGE BELLS.

MANY and curious are the minor wheels that, though often working in contrary directions, move together to set in motion the one great wheel of life.

In the present instance—Cecie's wedding—four people had been brought together who would gladly have kept any distance between them.

Sir Hugh Stapylton had of course been bidden to the wedding, as uncle of the bride, and was staying at Sibthorp.

Dick Challoner, some weeks back, had

received a note from Mrs. D'Eyncourt, inviting him with his wife and daughter to the wedding. The Hon. Richard had known Sir Herbert from infancy, and he, having no sister of his own, had asked Louise Challoner to officiate as bridesmaid. Louise was of course delighted, though her parents knew nothing of the bride beyond the fact that Sir Herbert stated her to be the daughter of the late Col. the Hon. Edward de Vere, third son of the late Earl of Wolvermere. They were to arrive at Eaglescliff late on the eve of the wedding.

Miss Ainsworthy had also received a gracious note from Mrs. D'Eyncourt, and, coupled as it was with Cecie's entreaties, she accepted, though still hardly recovered from her recent illness, and by no means desirous of meeting Sir Hugh so soon.

She was to go down by the afternoon train, and had hardly seated herself in the

carriage, when two ladies and a gentleman entered it. She never raised her eyes from her book till a familiar voice said :

“How do you do, Miss Ainsworthy?”

It was Mrs. Challoner, and, looking up she met Dick’s eyes fixed on her searchingly. She made a movement as though to leave the carriage ; but at the moment the whistle sounded, the train was in motion, and she was forced to return the greetings.

“Are you not pleased to see me?” she asked, holding her hand.

“To see you, yes,” Mabel answered, laughing.

“Then kiss me and prove it,” she said, holding up her pleasant good-humoured face.

Mabel kissed her willingly ; but still without noticing Dick. Mrs. Challoner leant forward and whispered :

"I know you are angry with Dick. Make it up, do."

Mabel drew back, shaking her head haughtily ; but Mrs. Challoner pleaded eagerly :

"I know he behaved badly, and offended you."

"Nay, rather insulted," Mabel interposed.

"Yes, yes, I know ; and he confessed as much to me ; but do forgive him. I know that he is very sorry. Can you not pardon him ?"

"Hardly," Mabel returned coldly.

"Do try. It was partly your fault."

"My fault ?"

"Yes ; if you had not been so charming he would never have offended. Forgive him, for my sake. How can we be friends if you will not speak to him ? And I have my little Louise with me, who is so anxious to know you."

“Mrs. Challoner I cannot. I have vowed never voluntarily to speak to your husband again.”

“Well, and you won’t do so now. Dick!” she called, and as he seated himself beside her, added: “Make your peace.”

“Am I forgiven?” he asked, holding out his hand to Mabel.

“I cannot forgive, but I will endeavour to forget,” she answered icily, never attempting to extend her own.

“Will you be the same as you were before?”

“I will endeavour to be cordial with you, for your wife’s sake.”

“And must I be content with that?” he asked ruefully.

“I think she is a great deal kinder to you than you deserve,” his wife said, laughing. “Now shake hands, and let us have a cosy journey down.”

Mabel somewhat reluctantly complied ; but the cloud cleared from her brow when she turned round to meet the smiling saucy face of Challoner's daughter, and took in her own the mite of a hand so warmly extended.

Louise Challoner in no way resembled either of her parents. They were both tall and big, whereas she was the tiniest little woman imaginable. A trim round figure, diminutive hands and feet, a small face in which every line and curve tended towards an expression of saucy sweetness, and large, very wide-open brown eyes. Her piquancy was heightened by the way she wore her hair—parted on one side and brushed into countless short curls on her forehead.

Mabel felt instinctively drawn to her, and listened with unfeigned amusement to her quaint speeches and pleasing voice. Dick was very subdued. He felt his

footing to be far from firm, so preferred silence to a snubbing. Nor was he slow to perceive that bright little Louise would be another link to bind Mabel into tolerating him.

In a very short time the woman and the girl had formed the commencement of a warm attachment. Mabel's, a pure liking for the bright, fresh, unsullied nature of the girl; and Louise's, a worship bordering on idolatry for the most beautiful and charming woman it had ever been her lot to meet.

Mabel's surprise may be imagined when she learnt that they too were bound for the Cornish wedding. When Mrs. Challoner questioned her about the bride, she only replied that she had been placed at her school by her uncle, but without mentioning who he was, for she could not bear to breathe Sir Hugh's name in Dick Challoner's hearing.

Thus they journeyed on, little thinking what awaited them on the morrow.

"My wedding morning," Cecie said, waking, and resting on her elbow, while she took the cup of chocolate her maid had brought for her ; "my wedding morning. Pull up the blind and let me look out Marie. I used to think it would be awfully nice to be married, but I'm not sure I think so now."

"*Mais, mam'selle !* Not nice, when you have all these beautiful new dresses ? Look at the white satin. Why, you ought to be the happiest demoiselle in the world."

"Dresses don't make happiness Marie. Though," she added to herself, "I fear they will have to make mine." Then to her maid she said : "Leave me now Marie ; I will ring by-and-by," and as the door closed on her she soliloquised : "In a few more hours I shall be for ever freed from that

hated life with those two horrible women ; but whether I shall be happier, God only knows. One little month ago I had but one thought, and that was to secure Sir Herbert ; and now that the prize is so surely mine, I would gladly relinquish it if I could. He does not care for me ; no, not a bit. He'll marry me because he feels in honour bound ; but after—what will come after ? He does not even keep up the slightest show of affection. He has been away three weeks, and in that time has written to me once : ‘ Dear Miss De Vere.—Yours truly. If I had accepted poor Darrell, he would have been very different ; but somehow I am glad I did not sell myself to him. He deserves a better wife than ever I shall be, and as for the man I have to marry, I suppose so long as he takes me about and gives me plenty of money I ought to be happy. No, not happy ; rather content. Happiness means love ; content is money.

I wonder whether Herbert will ever love me? I fear he is not likely to; and if he ever finds out the true story of my birth it won't increase the likelihood. But it is no use indulging in gloomy thoughts. I must go through with this wedding. I have gone too far to retrace my steps, but I can and will try to make up in the future for the past." Then rising she rang her bell, and commenced dressing.

Hardly had she completed her toilette when Miss Ainsworthy entered, to bring her a handsome ring, and to admonish her once more as to her past and future.

"My child," she concluded, "I greatly fear you don't love the man you are marrying as a wife should love her husband, and the result may bring misery to you both; though if you enter on this new life with a fixed determination to do your duty, you will find peace, and in time happiness. If ever you are in trouble dear, no matter

what, come to me, and I will help you as far as it lies in my power." And kissing her tenderly, she went downstairs to chat with the other guests till time to start for church.

The FitzAlleyns were to give a grand ball in the evening in honour of the wedding, to which all the guests and neighbourhood were invited, and the preparations were on so magnificent a scale, that Maud in her sweet amiability had no fear but that she could easily eclipse what she was pleased to term Mrs. D'Eyncourt's "little breakfast."

At last the start was made, and as they passed through the village there were evident signs of rejoicing; for Miss Fitz Alleyn, with all her faults, was very kind-hearted and good to the poor. Every cottage exhibited a flag or decoration of some kind, and all the villagers and fishers, decked in their best, were hurrying to the

church, there to form themselves into an admiring and huzzaing group.

Maud had given the school-children white frocks, and baskets with flowers to strew before Cecie as she returned to her carriage Lady Mainwaring; and she had also been occupied in decorating the church with flowers.

It was a gala day—the sun shining brightly overhead, a soft quiet breeze rippling the sweet blue sea that plashed tenderly against the rocks, as if to remind them that though their married life was stormy at times, yet they had loved and still loved, despite the many times they would part in anger, only to meet again in fiercer fury.

Up rolled the carriages full of blue-robed bridesmaids, laughing at the compliments of the attendant grooms, each damsel that the villagers recognised being loudly cheered.

Then the guests. Beautiful Mabel Ains-

worthy in a soft pale sea-green dress, covered with clouds of old filmy lace, a dainty bonnet that looked as though blown together with fairy breezes, and rarely-carved rich coral ornaments. With her Dick Challoner, quiet, courteous, unobtrusive, but impossible to avoid. Darrell D'Eyncourt also, attending sweet little Louise, whose winsome face won the hearts of the on-lookers.

"Bless her sweet face," said one, "she'll be the next bride, mark my words," and as Louise, blushing and shy at these very broad compliments, strove to hide her face in her bouquet, it slipped from her hand, and rolled to the side. Before Darrell could reach it, an old man amongst the bystanders had seized it, and holding it to her, said :

"You did right to throw it away, missie ; *you* don't need no flowers, for you are the bonniest among them yourself."

Louise took the bouquet from him with a soft smile, then holding it to him, said shyly :

“Would you like them?”

“Ay, that I would, missie,” he answered heartily; “but they’re too good for the like o’ me. Just ye use them the day through, and when ye’re done with them, send ’em down to old Nat Martin. They’ll remind him of the little leddy however dead they are,” and he withdrew into the crowd as she passed on into the church.

Mabel and Dick proceeded slowly up the aisle.

“It’s slow knowing no one here,” he was just saying, when suddenly he started violently, and Mabel looking up, followed the direction of his eyes.

Just before them two ladies and a gentleman were standing; the gentleman was Sir Hugh Stapylton, but the ladies,

who were dressed in the extreme height of fashion, Mabel did not recognise.

Sir Hugh advanced with a hot flush on his face, and taking Mabel's hand, said :

“Miss Ainsworthy, I hoped you would not come ;” and as Mabel looked at him in silent astonishment, she heard Dick Challoner exclaim, in a voice of amazement :

“Ada ! Miami ! how the —— did you get here ?”

She looked towards the two ladies and saw the colour fade from both their faces, and one seemed as though she would have fainted.

“Why Ada, what's the matter ?” he again demanded.

Pulling herself together with a great effort, she cried hoarsely :

“For Heaven's sake not that name. We are the Miss FitzAlleyns—and don't know you.”

“What does it all mean?” he cried, bewildered.

“That you must forget the past,” she said eagerly.

“And the present?”

“Is the marriage of Sir Hugh Stapylton’s niece.”

A light gleamed in Dick Challoner’s eyes.

“Is there any foul play?” he said. “Mainwaring is my friend, almost a son to me. Who is the bride?”

“Sir Hugh Stapylton’s niece,” Lyn said, with a tremor in her voice.

“And not——”

“No, no!” cried Lyn. “Here she is!”

“I can’t allow this to go on,” he cried; “I must ask Stapylton about it.”

“You cannot, you shall not,” Maud whispered; but Dick’s hand was laid on Sir Hugh’s arm, and he said in a low hurried voice:

“Who is this girl?”

“Guess for yourself,” Sir Hugh answered in the same tone.

“Does Mainwaring know?”

“I believe so. I never saw him till last night. He wrote for my consent, and from the letter—which I will give you—he appears to. I endeavoured to mention it last night, but he said he would rather not speak on the subject.”

Dick Challoner took the letter and read the following paragraph :

“I am fully aware of the peculiar circumstances of Miss De Vere’s life, and my request for a speedy marriage is to be enabled to remove her from a guardianship which must be as objectionable to yourself as to me.”

“Then I have no more to say,” said Dick returning the letter, and adding to

himself, "but that Herbert is a bigger fool than I took him for." Then turning to the FitzAlleyns, who were watching him anxiously, he said: "I am satisfied; I shall not mar this charming wedding."

The bride arrived, looking wonderfully pretty in her snowy robes and long white flowing veil.

The ceremony proceeded without the slightest hitch, and Cecie, pale and trembling, walked down the aisle on her husband's arm, vaguely wondering what her married life would prove.

The breakfast went over as such dreary festivals usually do. Dick Challoner, seated beside Miss FitzAlleyn, was deep in a long undertone conversation. Sir Hugh had found an opportunity to speak to Miss Ainsworthy.

"You heard the conversation in the church?" he had asked.

"I could not avoid doing so."

“It needs an explanation,” he said, “and to-night I hope to find an opportunity of telling you all. Will you listen?”

She bowed her head gravely, and he left her.

Darrell D'Eyncourt had been prepared to find the day of Cecie's wedding the most miserable one of his life. He had suffered tortures during the term of the engagement, and the constant nearness of Cecie but added fresh pangs to his wound.

He had passed a night of sleeplessness and agony, and the day before the wedding had wandered about in a state bordering on distraction.

Evening came, and with it the arrival of the expected guests. Mrs. D'Eyncourt, with mind filled with the anxieties of the next day, had begged him to entertain them for her. He went reluctantly, and greeted them almost absently; but, despite

himself, he was roused to action and almost enjoyment by the gay brightness of little Louise.

When night came he found himself far less unhappy than he anticipated, and much more inclined for sleep; but through his dreams Louise Challoner's clear voice and fresh face echoed continually.

He had not found the wedding-day so wretched, enlivened as it had been by Louise's saucy chatter, and to his surprise he found he could be gay at the breakfast, even when he knew that Cecie had but just been parted from him for ever.

The so-called happy pair started at last, and for the rest of the day, till time for the grand ball at the FitzAlleyns, the garden at Eaglescliff was alive with laughter and colour.

CHAPTER II.

A LIFE'S HISTORY.

CARRIAGE after carriage rolled up to the broad steps of Sibthorp Manor. The ball was certainly a success, though the mistresses of the house seemed hardly in spirits to enjoy it.

Despite their bravery of dress, powder, and paint, there was a wanness about their faces that could not pass unremarked. Everyone thought it must be sorrow for parting with Cecie, and condoled with them accordingly, and thought what nice feeling they showed. No one divined the true cause; though, had they been present at a little conversation that took place on

the return from the breakfast, they would have been better informed.

Hurrying at once into Miss FitzAlleyn's sanctum they had faced each other, and given voice to their apprehension.

"Will he expose us?" Lyn asked, panting.

Maud buried her face in her hands, and gasped:

"Will he expose me to Hugh?"

"Do you think he would do that?" Lyn asked, with a start.

"I believe he would; and if he did, it would mean ruin, beggary, starvation."

"You must bind him to silence."

"I tried this morning."

"And what did he say?"

"That he really could not make up his mind; that he feared it would suit his purpose to tell."

"Oh Maud! are there no means of forcing him to keep silence?"

“None. I know Dick Challoner of old. He is not a man to threaten idly. Without doubt he has some scheme of his own on hand that my secret will be of use in; and he would sacrifice me with no more concern than he would smash a fly. I wish I could find out his little game; I’d ruin it for him. No Lyn, we shall find one day soon, that we have to make a bolt for it. The best thing we can do is to feather our nests while we’ve got the down handy. Our expenses must be put down, and we must declare them heavier. Now I will have a brandy-and-soda if you’ll ring, and go and lie down to try and get a wink of sleep before time to put on the war-paint.”

It was hardly surprising, under these circumstances, that they did look haggard and unfit to enjoy the festivities when night came.

The ball was at its height when Sir Hugh

entered the dancing-room in search of Miss Ainsworthy.

Mabel was a good dancer, and thoroughly enjoyed dancing, but to-night she was going in for it more than usual ; for she had overheard Dick Challoner lamenting that he never danced, and reviling it as an exercise only fit for servants and shop-girls, because he, Dick Challoner, did not join in it. Mabel decided that by dancing she would easily be able to avoid him, and, though he so far unbent from his rule as to engage himself to her for two square dances, she had succeeded in her object.

Sir Hugh made his way to her side, and, claiming her for the waltz, in a moment they were floating away together.

“Forgive me,” he whispered, “I ought not to have made you dance this, but I wanted just a few moments of happiness to give me strength for the task that lies before me.”

Mabel smiled on him softly, and gave herself up heart and soul to the pleasure of being once more near to the man she so hopelessly loved.

By-and-by they stopped close to an open window, and through it he led her along the deserted terrace. Finding her a seat, he hurried back for a wrap, and returning with one, folded it tenderly round her shoulders, and, after a few moments' hesitation, he spoke :

“Now that the time has come for the explanation, it seems almost impossible to me to lay bare before you the heart that has so long been bowed down by its weight of sorrow. I have borne it all so long alone, that it seems a harder task than I thought to show myself to you as I am ; and yet I feel that to you, whom I love better than my life, and whose kind word I prize more highly than all the gifts Fortune could bestow — to you I

shall find some solace in unburthening my sorrow.

“I know I have behaved basely and cruelly, my poor darling; and I can never pardon myself for the part I have acted. But to see you was to love you, and to love you was to gaze on Paradise from Hell.

“I saw what might have been, if only my hand could blot out the irrevocable past, and my soul writhed in torments.

“Yet I sought you. I never dared think that you felt more for me than simple kindness and friendship. At times a wild thought came to me that perhaps you might, you did, entertain a warmer feeling for me; but I banished the idea, for I knew that if it ever became a reality, my hours—nay, my moments—in your society would be numbered.

“For that mad night I never can—never will—forgive myself; and yet it would perhaps have been worse—far worse—to

live on deluding myself, and you too, with false vain hopes, than to face the situation and crush out the despair.

“Mabel, I don’t know how to tell you the truth, but told it shall be ; for this purpose I have forced my society on you, and it shall be told. How can I tell you the horrible truth !

“Mabel, all you see around you is mine, and its mistress, my wife—you shudder, and well you may—that woman who calls herself Maud FitzAlleyn, has been the bane and curse of my life. She was an actress. Many weary years ago I met her. She was ill, and in poverty, and was being basely treated by a man whom I knew. I befriended her and saved her from him, aiding her as much as it lay in my power. To be brief, she was very lovely, and I then very young and very foolish, and besides, master of myself and my property.

“In a very short time she had cajoled

me into marrying her. I soon saw the folly I had been guilty of, but I would have stood by her and acknowledged her, had she let me. But no, she always implored me to wait, saying she was so happy as she was, that she dreaded anyone trying to come between us if it were known to the world. I don't think I ever cared much about her ; her beauty fascinated me, but I never really loved her ; and, as I saw more of her, her coarseness appalled and disgusted me. I did not wish for any concealment, and was determined to put the thing straight before the world.

“ Finding she was so obdurate, I went abroad for a time, partly to be free from her and partly to allow time to work what persuasion could not.

“ For nearly three months I wandered about, not caring to send home for letters. One day a fit of duty overcame me, and

I started on the return journey. Passing through Paris I found letters at the hotel I always used. Amongst them was one from Ada Willmot—the name Miss Fitz-Alleyn then went by, announcing the birth of a daughter, and also her intention of returning to the stage; she found life in the home I had provided for her too humdrum. I hurried over to find the statement quite correct. She refused to be acknowledged, saying she would swear the story was false if I persisted in it; and suggested I should be wise not to do so for the sake of the child. She threw out a hint that perhaps at some future time, when she was tired of the stage, she would suffer it.

“I tried persuasion, force—everything to make her alter her determination—but all to no purpose; and at last, I left the country altogether, after having put a sufficient sum in my banker’s hands for

the proper support of my wife and child. She was very anxious I should settle something on her; but there I was as determined as herself—refusing to do so till she allowed me to acknowledge her. Very glad I was that I had been so firm; for, when I returned to England some few years later, I found to my horror that she and her sister had dragged my little Cecily on to the stage with them.

“I threatened to stop all supplies instantly if she were not taken off, and put under proper care, and have ever since remained on the spot to see she was well treated.

“About three years ago my wife condescended to give up the stage, and came to live here, still refusing obstinately to be acknowledged; and indeed now I am by no means anxious to alter the relations between us. You can imagine what a shattered unloved life mine has been, and is! That woman is a chain upon me

that drags me away from all happiness, and binds me a slave to misery and remorse. At times I gained from the present a little content, but that is even now denied me. I have dared to love, and from henceforth my life must be one long bitter penitence for the sin which, alas ! does not alone involve me."

There was a long pause. Mabel knew not what to say. Her heart was filled with pity for herself and for him, but she could not speak ; her grief and sympathy were too great for words. At last, mastering her emotion, she stretched out her hand, and, clasping his, looked earnestly into his face with moistened eyes.

Sir Hugh was content, and, laying his other hand over hers, he said :

"I knew you would pity me ; I knew your loving heart would feel for the grief in mine. Mabel darling ! if the future holds for me such bliss as freedom from

my bonds, may I fly to you? May I ask then for those kisses I would give my soul for now, yet dare not ask? Mabel, will you put your hand in mine and murmur in the ear—that I will bend so closely to catch the trembling tones—the life-giving words, ‘Hugh, I love you!’ Then sweetheart, you will raise your eyes to meet mine, and instead, you will find your lips madly, wildly, pressed in rapture to my own, and we will part no more.”

His voice trembled with intense emotion; his breath came quick and fast; he bent towards her to fold her in his arms. With a silent gesture, Mabel repulsed him, and rising laid her hand on his arm, and gazing reproachfully at him, calmed the storm that was raging within him.

“Hush! I entreat you,” she said; “we must not think of a future that may never come. Remember that, after all, you have

just told me, such words as are an insult to me. I do love you Hugh; but I love you too well to let you speak words which debase both yourself and me. We must part, and part till we can meet calmly as friends, or until there is no need for restraint, if that time ever comes. Who can tell what the future holds for us? We must wait patiently, and take cheerfully whatever falls to our lot. This I will give you for your comfort: if no change comes, if death should part us before you are released, then remember this, Hugh. I never have loved, and never can love, any other than you; and living or dead, I will be true to you—and to myself.”

“I deserve your rebuke,” he said humbly. “I thank you, Mabel, for your goodness. I honour you even more than I love you; and trust me, I too will

be faithful till the end; I too will be true to you—and to myself.”

With a silent hand-clasp, to register their mutual vow, they returned again to the ballroom.

Some of the guests had departed, and amongst the number the Eaglescliff party, with the exception of Dick Challoner, who waited to escort Miss Ainsworthy.

“Have you enjoyed the ball?” he asked, as they were on their homeward way.

“Very much.”

“You are looking fatigued. Were you not surprised to see Sir Hugh?”

“Not at all. I knew he would be there.”

“He has a sad story poor fellow, known only to himself and me, unless, indeed, you have learned it. Have you?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, he told you himself?”

"I can't see how this concerns you."

"In this way: that if you made it worth my while to tell, I fancy I know a small fact that might be of great service to Sir Hugh's happiness."

"You do? Tell it me."

"Nothing for nothing Miss Ainsworthy."

"Mr. Challoner!"

"Of course you are indignant; but let me tell you, Miss Ainsworthy, there is no more harm in my speaking thus to you than in Sir Hugh doing so. We are situated precisely in the same manner. The fact is, you love one and hate the other; hence what is virtue in him, is vice in me. You will not have my secret, then?"

"No!" she answered indignantly; "I scorn you and it. Dare to speak one word more in this strain, and no pleadings from your wife shall make me speak to you again."

Challoner gave a short laugh, and sat back in his corner murmuring :

“That has failed then. There are other resources in your fertile brain, though, Dick.”

CHAPTER III.

CECILY'S PRIZE.

It was a bright frosty morning, the bare branches of the trees in the park round Mainwaring Hall, glistened and shone with myriads of icicles in the faint red sunlight that glimmered amongst them. The ground was thick with pure white snow, the whole landscape clad in its snowy winter's garb.

The occupants of the Hall were seated at breakfast. Sir Herbert, Lady Mainwaring, and Mr. Geoffrey Tremayne—Sir Herbert's half-brother.

Cecie was looking charming, much

prettier than a few months ago, before her marriage. There had been no soul in her face before—it had been simply doll-like and pretty; but now there was a depth in her eyes, a light that was not born of happiness, but which gave to her face that which it had always lacked—expression.

To be really pretty, a woman's face must be one of three things—clever, piquante, or interesting. Either attribute will give it the requisite charm in the eyes of the grosser animal, man; but a face that wants all of these three, however perfectly formed and coloured, will soon pall on the senses, and eventually disgust them.

Sir Herbert's face was heavier and more discontented than ever; and yet, judging from the frequent and loving glances Cecie sent across to him, it was evident that to her it had become the perfection of manly beauty.

Geoffrey Tremayne was a dark dapper little man, rather good-looking and intensely gentlemanly—a great contrast to his half-brother.

He seemed to be much interested in watching his brother and his brother's young wife, but with a kindly expression on his face that seemed to say he wished them well.

Throwing aside his paper with an angry exclamation, Sir Herbert said :

“I never saw anything like the papers now ; they're as dull—as dull as everything else. When one is forced to live in a beastly hole like this, there might at least be something in the papers to vary the monotony. There's this frost ! What's to be done in the country when there's a frost ? All the hunting season passing away without the chance of a run. I can't stand this moping any longer. I shall run up to town, and see if everyone is as deadly-

lively there as they are here. I shall go up to-day."

"May I come too?" Cecie asked, her face flushing as she spoke to him.

"No, I don't want you."

"Oh, but, Herbert, you surely won't leave me here without you?" she asked, tears springing to her eyes at the mere thought.

"That is precisely my intention. Men don't want to be forced to drag their wives about with them wherever they go. I have been moped and miserable here long enough, and I am going away to enjoy myself, so I most certainly do not intend to take you."

Cecie flushed hotly, but made no rejoinder. Geoffrey looked up as though he would have spoken, but restrained himself. In a minute Sir Herbert spoke again.

"You can have people down here to

amuse you, if you like. Ask Louise Challoner and D'Eyncourt."

"Oh ! not Darrell," she said quickly.

Her husband looked up, his face contorted with passion.

"And why not Darrell ? Is this another of your secrets—another of these odd bits of the past, which are always cropping up ?"

"Herbert ! Herbert !" said Geoffrey.

"Don't interfere, Geoff. What's your reason, Lady Mainwaring ?"

"Herbert, I can't stay to hear you speak in this way," Geoffrey said, rising.

"Go to the —— !" he answered passionately, and as the door closed on his brother, he turned to his wife : "Now for your reason."

"I had no reason, Herbert," she answered.

"That nonsense won't do for me. You have a reason ; out with it."

Cecie could not say that she did not want Darrell to see how unhappy she was, so she only faltered out :

“He asked me to marry him. He was fond of me.”

“Oh, is that it? You may make your mind quite easy on that score then. He was quite consoled for your loss—which you seem to fancy so irreparable—by little Louise Challoner. You shall see them here together, just to reprove your vanity,” and catching up his hat, which lay near, he strode out through the French window, which, having flung open, he left for his little wife to close.

His footsteps had hardly died away on the crisp snow when Geoffrey reappeared.

“May I return Cecily?” he asked. He received no answer. Cecie, with tears in her eyes, was watching her lord’s retreating figure.

Geoffrey liked his little sister-in-law,

and noticed with disgust the unkind and often boorish way his brother behaved to her. He very frequently felt inclined to administer a sound thrashing on Cecie's behalf, for though very good friends with his step-brother, he was not above seeing his faults.

He approached Cecie softly, and said kindly :

"Never mind about Herbert. He always was a bear. Don't cry."

"But it's my fault. I am always vexing him," she said piteously.

"Nonsense! That you are not. I should think you would be far nearer the mark if you said he was always vexing you."

"Oh, indeed no Geoffrey!"

"Indeed yes; and if you were not so good to him, he would be far kinder to you."

"I think he means to be kind; but

oh, if you knew how sad he makes me ! I often wish I had never married. It was bad enough before, but life has been a hundred times worse since."

"What ! were you not happy at home ?"

"Home !" she echoed. "I had no home ; and oh Geoffrey, it is so sad to live like this. I don't think Herbert will ever forgive me, and the thought is so terrible to me."

"Forgive you ! What for ?" Geoffrey asked, in surprise.

Cecily paused, and gazed earnestly at him for a moment ; and then, putting out her hand to him, said :

"May I trust you Geoffrey ? May I tell you my trouble ? It would be such a relief to do so ; to have someone to unburden my heart to ; and you have always been so good to me. May I speak to you as if you were really my own brother ?"

“To be sure you may, you poor little woman; and if there is anything I can do to make you happier, you can count on me. Tell me what it is that is troubling you? What do you want Herbert’s forgiveness for?”

“Because I married him for a home, and he knows it; married him without really loving him, or caring whether he really loved me. He will never forgive me for it, and I believe sometimes he almost hates me.”

“You must not think that. You were certainly very very wrong to marry him without caring for him. Marriage is too serious a thing to be entered on lightly; but to such a young girl as you, it is not likely it assumed such a serious aspect; and it was far more the fault of those you were with than your own. Someone ought to have talked to you, and bade you consider the step you were about to take.

A fine house is a very nice thing Cecie, but were I a woman, ay, and a lady, I would rather teach, or serve in a shop, or be a telegraph-clerk to the end of my days, with never a sixpence too much in my pocket, than marry a man, whom I did not love, for the sake of his money. But there, it's no use crying over spilt milk; and there is this in your favour—that if you did not love the man you married at the time you were wed, you very soon learnt to after. Don't start Cecie, I can read your secrets for myself: you love your husband now. Is it not so?"

"Yes," Cecie faltered, "but he does not care about me. Was he ever fond of anyone else? Is that the reason of his coldness to me?"

Geoffrey felt half inclined to smile, she raised such anxious eyes to his face.

"Don't be alarmed about that," he rejoined quickly. "Herbert never cared

for anything but himself and his dogs. He is not a sociable man, or one at all likely to be demonstrative, but I think he is very fond of you."

"Do you really?"

"Oh yes, I am sure of it;" and Geoffrey turned away that she might not read the doubting expression on his face. It had at the moment occurred to him that, on the very few occasions on which he had heard Sir Herbert speaking of his wife, he had always spoken in the most slighting and unkind way.

"Are all girls unhappy when they marry?" Cecie asked, after a pause, and looking up to Geoffrey as an oracle on matrimonial matters—a position he by no means disliked. Who so ready to lecture on the married state, smooth all the rugged paths, unravel the knots—in theory—as bachelors and spinsters? Bachelors' wives, and maids' husbands,

always are perfectly well managed, and models in every way.

“Well, you see,” he answered, “girls who have no brothers do not understand men, and are always unhappy for the first six months of their married life. After that time they begin to get accustomed to their husbands’ ways, and they settle down and are comfortable. You see, men and women are so different. Now the wife very often feels slighted if her husband does not make a great fuss with her when he returns home tired after a day’s hunting, or shooting, or business; and at first, when he finds this out, he does his best to humour her, but it’s a bore to him, and in time becomes such an intolerable nuisance that he gets ill-tempered with her, and they drift apart. There is nothing a man hates so much as feeling bound to make a fuss with his wife, whether he is inclined or not. He likes to come in, dress, have his dinner, and then

be allowed an hour's quiet to read his paper or sleep; and if the wife has only the sense to leave him alone till mind and body are rested, he would be as agreeable as she could desire for the rest of the evening. I can quite see the subject from the wife's point of view at the same time. She has been alone, perhaps nearly the whole day, and has been counting on her husband's return for a little companionship, and feels disappointed, and perhaps vexed, at his taciturnity when he does come in. A little forbearance on both sides would not be amiss. Women expect life to be like a novel—all love and that sort of thing—and they find the reality so very different. As wives, they should expect only a very little love, and not bother for more than they get, and they will soon find their reward in watching the increasing growth of their husband's affection, instead of having to see it daily withering away, till the life

is almost extinct. I am only speaking for your good Cecie, and because I cannot bear to hear you complain, like so many another young wife, of your husband's lack of love. Treat Herbert as though you were fond of him certainly—but not as though he were a kind of idol. Do what he wishes you to do, and all that sort of thing, but don't let him find out how much you care for him. I should write to Louie Challoner and D'Eyncourt at once, and let him find the letters written when he returns at lunch. You will be a very happy couple by-and-by, never fear," and with a pleasant smile he went away.

With a weary sigh and heavy heart, Cecie went to the writing-table to carry out Geoffrey's kind advice. Poor girl, hers seemed a very sad life. By some strange fascination, or perhaps by the feminine love of being bullied, she had grown to dote

upon the husband who never gave her an affectionate word, never caressed her, and who never scrupled to show how extremely bored he felt in her society.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

LOUISE CHALLONER and Darrell arrived. As Cecie had feared, she found her husband even more unkind to her after their arrival than he had been before. He was always twitting her with her former flirtations, and jealous and suspicious if she spoke for a moment to Darrell.

She found this very hard to bear, and particularly so when in the society of Darrell she realised what a true heart she had thrown away for an empty title which had given her nothing but unhappiness.

She did not care for Darrell. Never for one moment did her heart waver from its

allegiance to her husband, but she noticed the many little attentions which he paid Louise, and which her husband never thought of offering to her; and she could not help thinking that all this would have been hers had she only not been dazzled by Sir Herbert's title.

Louise was evidently growing very fond of Darrell, and he liked her far better than any other woman he knew—after Cecie. The fact of her being Lady Mainwaring, another man's wife, had cured Darrell's love. She was not for him, so he would not think of her; and little Louise had laid her soft fingers on his wound, and held its gaping edges together so tenderly, that he could not help feeling warmly towards her, and she was gradually creeping into that place in his heart which had been Cecie's.

Darrell had come to Mainwaring Hall because he had misgivings about Sir

Herbert, and wanted to see if Cecie were well treated; and he stayed because, to his grief, he found she was not.

It was a dull oppressive day. Cecie's spirits, now never very high, had to-day sunk below zero. She felt unusually depressed, and as she said to Louise with a sad little smile, "as though something were going to happen." When the post-bag arrived, the weight that had been lying on her heart grew heavier, till she could hardly breathe.

Her husband opened it.

"There is only one letter, and that is for you, Lady Mainwaring," he said.

"Oh," she rejoined listlessly, and stretching out her hand for it.

He never attempted to give it her, but sat turning it over, examining it.

"I don't know the writing," he said suspiciously. "I shall open it."

"Very well," she answered.

He tore off the envelope, and began to read. In a moment his face darkened to fury.

"Come with me," he said. "I want to speak to you."

Making an excuse to her guests, Cecie rose and followed him into the library.

"Read that," her husband said, tossing the letter to her.

It was from Maud FitzAlleyn, and ran thus :

"DEAR CEC,

"I am hard up, and must beg you to send me a liberal cheque by return of post. I dare not apply to my bankers, as I have already had my allowance. Considering the tie between us, I feel myself justified in writing to you. Indeed, it is plainly your duty to send me whatever you can spare.

"Yours affectionately,

"MAUD FITZALLEYN."

“What does this mean?” he asked fiercely.

Cecie trembled and quailed before him. The awful moment had come when he would discover the one great secret of her life. She felt sure that if he knew the truth about her parentage he would put her from him at once. At any cost she must prevent the discovery.

With white face but firm lips she answered :

“It seems plain enough : Aunt Maud wants money.”

“Aunt Maud !” he echoed, with an oath. “Have I not forbidden you to speak of those women as your relatives ? What is this tie she speaks of ?”

“I—I don’t know,” Cecie faltered.

“You know you are speaking falsely,” he said savagely, seizing her by the shoulder and forcing her to face him.

“Oh Herbert ! Herbert ! You hurt me !”

she cried piteously, raising her eyes to his face. But she read no mercy or pity in it.

"I ask you once for all, is there any tie, any relationship—no matter how slight—between you?"

"None," she replied.

"It is well," he said, dropping her arm, and forced, in spite of himself, to believe in her reiterated denial; "for I swear to you, that if I found you had deceived me in that, I would put you away from me, and never look on your false face again."

"I know it," groaned the girl, seizing one of her husband's hands in agony at the mere thought of such a thing. "But oh Herbert, could you send me from you when I love you so?"

"Love me so!" he echoed, mimicking her tone. "Your love was all directed to my title, and surely you ought to be content when the prize is your own."

She clung to his arm.

“ Oh Herbert, I own to you that I did not love you at first—that I looked on you as a means of freeing myself from those dreadful women ; but, oh husband, believe me when I tell you how bitterly I repent it, now that I have learned to love you, and know what a deep wrong I was inflicting on you. Can you not forgive me, and love me a little in return ? ”

“ Get away,” he said roughly. “ I hate scenes. Is this a melodrama to enable you to appear before your quondam lover with hollow eyes and tear-bedewed cheeks, the injured, unloved wife ? ”

Even this brutal speech roused no fire within her ; she grasped his hand.

“ Oh Herbert, why are you so cold to me, when I would give my life to earn your love ? Oh, can it be that you hate me ? ”

He looked steadily in her face for a

moment, a contemptuous smile on his mouth.

“No,” he answered coldly; “I don’t hate you——I despise you.”

“You—despise—me,” she said slowly, lingering over each syllable as though determined to remember them; and, giving her husband one long look of love and pain, she turned to the door to escape ere the sobs that were rising in her throat mastered her.

“Stay a minute. I have not done with you yet,” he said, and pressed his hand to his brow as though in thought.

She turned and waited his commands, supporting herself against the carved book-case.

In a moment he spoke again.

“If these women really are nothing to you, you will have no objection to stopping their importunities at once and for good. Come and write what I shall dictate.”

Without a word she obeyed him, drew paper and pens towards her, and waited till he was ready.

Then she wrote the following :

“MADAM,

“As I do not recognise any existing tie between us, I am much surprised by your letter of appeal to me. I must decline to give you any assistance, and beg you not to make any future application.

“I am, Madam,

“Yours faithfully,

“CECILY MAINWARING.”

She wrote, addressed, and sealed it as one in a dream, dimly conscious that her husband was directing her actions; and when it was finished, she raised her eyes to his face, mutely asking his leave to go away.

Something in the white misery of her

face, in the painful brightness of the tearless eyes, softened him. With a feeling of pity, utterly foreign to him, he stooped over her and kissed her.

A burning blush spread over her cheek and brow, and with a look of happiness and gratitude that would have melted a heart of stone she rose from her seat, and clasping her arms around his neck, returned his kiss with rapture.

Then the memory of his bitter words flashed across her mind, and before he had had time to repulse her, she had fled from the room and sought her own, there to ponder over the painful scene she had just gone through.

In the more serious thoughts that occupied her mind, she forgot all about the letter that she had written, never dreaming of the dire consequences that were to arise from it.

CHAPTER V.

PLAYED OUT.

It was a lovely moonlight night, and Sibthorp Manor was bathed in the lustrous beams, looking more beautiful than ever, the bright beams glancing on tree and shrub silvering and softening everything. On the rocks at the foot of the cliff, the tide was rippling and plashing with soft gentle murmurs, catching the moon's rays on its broad bosom, and reflecting it in a thousand tiny wavelets that reared their heads proudly to let the light touch them, and then sank laughing to hide from it behind their playfellows.

Jack Frost was abroad with his sack of diamonds, sprinkling them recklessly from side to side.

“You and I together will make a night that will force the old day to hide its face with envy,” he said to the moon, and set to work early that he might not lose a moment.

“Ha, ha!” he cried to the sea; “the land sparkles better than you do. Leap and jump as you will, you can’t look as bright as this grass-plot does. Look at every tiny blade gemmed with diamonds. You can’t equal that. Now keep your temper, and don’t lash yourself into a fury, for you will only get frothy, and look no better than bottled beer; and then you won’t be able to glisten at all, and the moon and I will laugh at you.”

The sea dropped a big wave sullenly on the shore, and it boomed and echoed among the caves and rocks, and when the foam

it brought had subsided, took Jack Frost's advice, and lay quietly, only heaving gently as before to reflect the moon's light.

How peaceful nature ! Suddenly a sound disturbs it. Carriage wheels. Jack Frost grinds his teeth with rage.

"There now ! those stupid people will go spoiling my work on the drive ! Why could they not be in their beds at such an hour, instead of interfering with me ?"

The carriage rolled by, leaving narrow tracks and hoof-marks all along what had been a smooth sheet of diamonds ; but almost before it reached the door, Jack Frost was busy repairing the damage, and effacing the traces of earthly footsteps in Fairyland.

Maud and Evelyn FitzAlleyn were returning from a small musical-party.

Slowly they made their way through the great hall, and up the broad oaken staircase.

They ascended slowly and wearily, and there was a look on each face that seemed to denote something had happened.

Lyn's was sweeter and her smile falser than usual; while Maud's was set and stern, and, when she spoke, her voice coarser and louder than her wont.

The maid carrying their wraps, and noting these signs with inward misgivings, was rejoiced to hear Miss FitzAlleyn say :

"I shall not want you to-night Whiting; you can go to bed at once."

Safe within their sanctum their tongues were unloosed. Maud began :

"It seems to me, Lyn, the game's up here."

"Nonsense!" Lyn said, starting at the forcible way Maud put it. "We shall be all right here for some time longer I hope."

"Not we; they have found us out."

"Found us out! What do you mean? They are not likely to find us out. It was

only a bit of petty spite on the part of the Fells. It was rather too much in their own house though."

"Yes. I wish we had stayed at home. Fancy a dinner and a musical reunion combined! Nobody but a fool would have thought of such a mixture."

"The musical evening was merely to draw all the musical people together, to talk over this club project."

"Lyn, we were fools to put up, when we heard the members were to be balloted for."

"We *should* have been fools, had we known that some kind friend would black-ball us both. I don't see how we could avoid giving in our names, being the acknowledged leaders of music here."

"There's one good thing; their society won't be worth two pins without us," said Maud viciously.

"But you forget Maud, there is the

slight to be got over. Of course we cannot go to the Fells' again, and all the singing community will look shyly at us."

"That is exactly the point I was driving at. We are done for here. They have been turning the cold shoulder on us for some time past. Ever since Cecie's wedding there has been a something. I know Lucy Fells heard Challoner exclaim 'Ada ! Miami !' and I believe she heard me mutter the name he was to call us here. Then that stuck-up madam, Miss Ainsworthy, heard it, and goodness knows what she would say. I think it's a pity we did not start school-keeping, if it gives one such a high position, and enables one to be 'Hail fellow, well met !' with all the swells about, and not to find the guardians of an old pupil fit even to speak to."

"Never mind about that woman ; what's to be done ?"

"I can't think. I was totally un-

prepared for this blow. The only thing that seems clear to me is that we must move."

"Move! Where and how? As you know, we have no money; and now Cecie is married we've so little hold on Sir Hugh."

"Oh, the money will be all right enough. Cecie will send some; I have written to ask her. We will move on what she sends and what I have put by lately; and till the allowance is due again we must be careful. Why, here is a letter from Cecie," turning to a side-table; "I overlooked it in the worry of these Fells. It has just come at the most opportune moment."

Tearing it open, she glanced through it.

"Lyn, look here! Read this! Can it be possible? Lyn, am I sober?" and she handed it to her sister with horror-struck gaze.

Lyn took the letter and read it

slowly through, as though it were impossible to realise it; then she looked up at her sister with a face that was haggard and drawn.

"This is blow on blow" was all she said.

The words seemed to rouse Maud from her lethargy.

"Yes," she said viciously, biting her lips with her small white teeth. "Yes, as you say, it is blow on blow; both from the most unexpected quarters. One we cannot retaliate; the other we can, and will. Am I to submit to a blow from her without returning it? Am I to sit down quietly under an insult from my own child?"

"But she does not know that. Remember she was always brought up to believe she was no relation to us."

"Does she not know? Well then, she shall very soon be disabused of her

ignorance. As Lady Mainwaring, she is too grand to recognise us; we are far too common to be taken any notice of by so grand a personage as she has suddenly become. But I will humble her pride for her, and what I cannot gain by fair means I will extort by foul."

"I don't understand what you mean. I believe you have gone mad. What's the use of drivelling like that, when there are much more serious matters to be faced and put right?" and Lyn gazed contemptuously at her sister's flaming cheeks and flashing vindictive eyes.

"Of course you don't understand, because you won't. I am facing the difficulties, and smoothing away all our troubles in discovering a Golconda. Yes, a perfect mine of wealth. Can't you

see she is in our power? Can't you see we can force her to satisfy our demands, whatever they may be? What do you think prompted her to write this letter? Why, fear of her husband. She wants to sever all connection with us, and thinks this is the best way to do it. When she married Sir Herbert, her grand baronet, she told him nothing about the past. Cecie is no fool, and has a memory, so it is useless pretending the past is a blank to her. She lied to him about her antecedents, well knowing his pride was too great to mate with her if he knew all. I shall write to her at once, and quietly state the whole truth."

"The whole?" gasped Lyn.

"Of course not. The whole as far as it regards herself; and having put her in possession of the facts of the case,

threaten to inform her husband unless she sends me money. That will bring a cheque as fast as the mail will carry it."

There was silence for a short while, and then Lyn, who in her young days had always been against her, who had christened her the "Incubus," and wished a thousand times that she were dead or out of the way, suddenly pleaded for her.

"Spare her Maud. You will mar her whole life if you do this thing. Be merciful to her, poor girl; and if she can be happy with that brute of a man, let her be so."

"Spare her!" Maud cried, in fury. "Yes, spare her in her wealth, to sacrifice us in our poverty. No; this very night the letter shall be written," and seizing writing materials, she wrote shortly and hastily these fatal words:

“CECILY,

“You questioned the tie between us when I asked you for money, as from friend to friend. I defy you to deny, or disregard it now, when I demand assistance from a child to her mother.

“If you still hesitate, I shall make it my business to inform your husband on some of the facts in the past of both of us—notably at what an early age your talent for acting was not only cultivated but of excellent use; and thus prepare him, in a slight measure, for the domestic tragedy which is likely to ensue on his looking up the history of your *relatives*, the Wolvermeres.

“I conclude by signing myself for the first, and I hope the last time,

“Your affectionate Mother,

“MAUD FITZALLEYN.

“P.S.—I trust this letter will not drive you to your old recourse—eau-de-cologne. I wonder does your husband know you were expelled from Miss Ainsworthy’s for indulging too frequently in that fragrant pick-me-up.”

“That will do for her ladyship, I should think,” Miss FitzAlleyn commented, reading it over to Lyn ere sealing it.

“There is no doubt it will do for her,” Lyn answered. “Will you not reflect ere you send away a letter which is to blight the happiness of your own child?”

“And how much like my own child she has been to me ! Reflect ? No. For fear that you should badger me till I alter it, I will send it off at once.”

Ringing the bell violently, Miss FitzAlleyn bade the shivering half-clothed servant who answered it, send round for the groom at once to saddle the fleetest

horse and be round at the house in ten minutes.

“I have a letter that must catch the night mail. He must ride with it to Penshurst.”

Poor Jack Frost was to have no time allowed him to rest from his labours, and admire his handiwork. Down the drive sped a mounted man, the hoofs of his horse driving the toiler's dainty handiwork far and wide, and making such deep furrows that it was quite impossible to eradicate them, and poor Jack had to leave his work uncompleted and retire grumbling, as over the edge of the horizon peeped the sun, sending a sleepy arm across the sea, to know what they had all been doing with themselves while he had been sleeping in his ocean bed.

A few little birds—those courageous enough to stay and brave the wintry weather—lifted their heads from under

their downy wings, shook their soft feathers into order, and hopping on to a fresh twig began to tell the sun all about it; at which the sea got cross, and sending up two or three big waves to drown their little voices, told the sun never to heed them, as they had been asleep all the night through, and forthwith told his story of Jack Frost's frolics.

CHAPTER VI.

AN ORDEAL.

FROM darkness to light; from Purgatory to Paradise; from Maud FitzAlleyn to Mabel Ainsworthy; to Miss Ainsworthy, who, since Cecie's wedding, had been pursuing her way in much her usual peaceful fashion.

She was kind to her pupils, lively amongst her friends, clever and busy with her pen—to outward seeming the same as ever; but in her heart there was a great change. Everything was the same even to her, but with a thick gray veil over it that hid all the brightness, and made life sad and weary.

Mabel had found her treasure only to have it ruthlessly torn from her—her heart had become human only to be wounded past healing. At her age, with her powers of loving, she had learned the bitter lesson of first love ; and it had done for her, as for so many of her younger, more trusting, and less experienced sisters—taken all life's sunshine away and left her blank and desolate.

She was a true woman ; she had made an idol and worshipped it ; and when she found her god but clay, she but loved it the better for its defects. She told herself daily and hourly that Hugh Stapylton was false, that he was not one whit better than Mr. Challoner ; and yet she could not tear the one from the dearest place in her heart, while she detested the other with the passion of a woman who feels herself insulted beyond forgiveness.

Women are "kittle cattle." Never was a truer aphorism.

She had heard nothing of Sir Hugh since the wedding, beyond a stray word or two dropped by Mr. Challoner in his frequent visits.

Never a week passed without the Hon. Richard presenting himself at her door, sometimes with his wife, sometimes with Louise, but more often alone. He would come; he utterly disregarded the coldness with which Mabel would receive him, took no notice of the persistent way she refused to go to theatre, concert, or opera with him, but went on pressing invitations on her, as though he felt sure she must yield.

Any other man would have given up the pursuit, and had too much *amour propre* to thrust himself into a house where he was so evidently unwelcome; but Challoner either did not, or would not see this, and continued his visits.

He had never alluded to his first offence,

and Mabel had half begun to think he had forgotten all about the foolish idea.

It was a cold damp afternoon about a fortnight before Miss FitzAlleyn had written her first letter to Cecie.

Mabel was seated at her writing-table, busy with an essay which was to appear in the next week's "Scrutator," when her neat maid came in with a telegram.

"Put it down," she said carelessly, too engrossed in her work to care to be interrupted.

The maid obeyed, but lingered a moment about the room. To her mind a telegram meant something of importance, and she was half vexed with her mistress for taking it so very calmly.

She had hardly reached her own domain however, before the bell rang violently; and hastening up, she found her mistress, with a face white as death, holding on to a

chair for support, and reading the telegram over and over again.

“Lucy,” she cried hurriedly, “take my compliments to Mrs. Eltham, and tell her I am called away to see a very dear friend who is ill, dying;” and her voice broke at the word. “Tell her, I trust she will look to everything in my absence; and then come back as quickly as you can to dress me. Send Martin for a cab while Wilson gets ready to come with me.”

Ten more minutes, and she was driving rapidly towards King’s Cross, holding the telegram in her hand, and reading it over as though the short sentences were not burnt into her brain in letters of fire.

“Dr. Sharp, To Miss Ainsworthy.
“Railway Hotel,
“Westham,

“Sir Hugh Stapylton has met with an accident hunting. He has asked for you. Come at once if you wish to see him alive.”

All was forgiven, all forgotten, at the thought of the man she still so fondly loved lying ill—dying, the telegram said. He must have asked for her, or else this doctor would never have known whom to telegraph for. He loved her still and, forgetting everything but that Hugh was ill, she bade the cabman hasten, and had the good luck to be just in time for the train to Westham.

How wearily the time passed—every second seemed an hour—until at last the welcome cry of “St’am! St’am!” reached her ears, and alighting almost before the train had stopped, she came face to face with Richard Challoner.

“You here!” she cried in astonishment.

“Yes,” he answered calmly; “I came to meet you.”

“Then you have seen him. How is he?”

“Too ill to recognise you yet, I fear.”

“I will wait. I have brought my maid with me.”

“Your maid! The devil you have!” and his face expressed the most utter perplexity. Mabel had not noticed his exclamation, but watched him with some impatience as he stood in his favourite attitude when puzzled, with one hand behind him and the thumb-nail of the other between his teeth. “What is done must be done quickly,” he muttered; and then turning to Mabel, said aloud,

“If you will permit me, Miss Ainsworthy, I will send your maid round in a cab; for ourselves there is a short cut across a field, that will bring us to the inn a long while first.”

“Pray, pray make haste, Mr. Challoner. I entreat you to lose no time.”

With hasty strides he reached the station door, and beckoning the only cabman who was waiting, said :

“Look here my good man, would you like to earn a couple of sovereigns?”

“Would I? You’re joking me.”

“No; I’m in sober earnest. I’ve a job I want done well; if you will do it, here are the sovereigns.”

“I’m your man, sir.”

“Well then, I shall bring a young woman out and put her in the cab. Drive her to A—— Abbey, which, as you know, is a good fifteen miles off. If her mistress has not arrived, bring her back in time for the last train. In any case, you are neither to ask nor answer any questions.”

“Ay, sir; I understand,” said the man, pocketing the sovereigns and mounting his box.

Richard Challoner re-entered the station and in a minute returned with the maid, whom he saw safely deposited in the cab; then, fetching Mabel, the two wended their way on foot to the hotel. Arrived

there, Miss Ainsworthy was shown into a nicely-furnished room.

“Will you have dinner up now, sir?” asked the man.

Mr. Challoner looked vexed ; but ere he could speak, Mabel cried :

“No ; I will see the invalid gentleman first.”

“The invalid gentleman, ma’am ?” said the waiter, astonished.

“Yes, yes ; all right. I’ll take the lady,” said Challoner ; and following the man to the door, closed and—to Mabel’s infinite alarm—locked it, and put the key in his pocket.

“Mr. Challoner what does this mean ?” Mabel cried, starting to her feet.

He paused before answering, and quietly taking off his gloves and overcoat, flung them on a chair ; then sitting down by the fire, spoke.

“Mean, my dear Mabel? Why, that I love you better than ever.”

“Pshaw Mr. Challoner, it is folly to talk like this when a life is hanging in the balance.”

“My dear girl,” he said, calmly crossing his feet, “there is no life hanging in the balance, that I know of. I must be more explicit, and tell you that I have attained my hopes and my revenge by one simple exertion of my diplomatic brain. Your friend Sir Hugh, to the best of my belief, is at this moment enjoying excellent health.”

“What can this be?” cried Mabel. “What did that telegram mean?”

“Nothing,” said Challoner, with a cynical smile.

“And am I to understand——” Mabel began, flushing crimson.

“That you are in my power? Certainly my haughty Mabel, you are. You

scorned and defied me once ; and yet here you are, come like an obedient child at my bidding."

"And perhaps, now that your absurd farce is played out, you will allow me to return?"

"Nay, that I never will," he cried. "You know how I love you, Mabel, and I swear to keep you here till you learn to love me in return."

"You!" she cried, recoiling from him, her face white with deadly passion.

"Yes, me. I'm not such an objectionable fellow, am I?"

"Faugh! You are more hateful to me than Satan himself would be."

"You'll get over that in time," he said coolly. He felt himself so thoroughly master of the situation, that he did not trouble to woo; indeed, she was too angry for him to dare attempt it.

"In time! You will not detain me?"

“Oh!”

“Mr. Challoner you dare not.”

“Mabel I have made up my mind; and I never swerve from a determination. You’ll have to remain. Why not stay with a good grace? Do, darling!” And he took her hand.

Mabel snatched it away, and clenching it, cried between her teeth,

“Oh God! that you should so insult me!”

“You will not refuse me?”

“I will—I do!” she cried hotly.

“Oh Mabel! can you not love me?”

“Love! I hate—I abhor you.”

“Not if your kindness to me could bring happiness to someone you love?”

“I fail to see your meaning.”

“Supposing I knew Hugh Stapylton’s secret? Supposing I could remove his sorrow? Supposing I could prove that all his life he had been imposed upon?”

“Could you?”

“If you loved me.”

“On your honour?”

“On my honour as a gentleman, I have proof—letters in that coat,” pointing to the overcoat, “that can establish the fact.”

Mabel was silent. She could not, would not, sacrifice herself for the man she loved, and yet—— She walked to the window in great agitation.

Suddenly her eyes lighted, a smile overspread her face. The room was on the ground-floor, the window a French one, and at the end of the trim well-kept garden she saw a gate leading straight into the station. If only she could get the letters and escape.

She turned to Richard Challoner and said :

“Give me time to think.”

He started up in rapture, and came towards her, a bright light in his eyes.

“Oh Mabel; can it be?”

“I can’t tell what it may be yet. I am hungry, go and order dinner,” she said, with a faint attempt at coquetry.

He caught her in his arms, and pressed hot kisses on her now impassive face.

“My darling, how happy I am,” he cried.

Her breast heaving with rage, her face pale as death, she yet gently withdrew herself from his embrace, and said softly, so as to hide her quivering voice: “I have given you no answer yet Dick. Go and order dinner.”

“I will go,” he said reluctantly.

Mabel mistook his backward glance for one of distrust, and with a shudder stretched out her hands to him, and putting up her cold white lips kissed his cheek.

“No, no,” she gasped, as he would have embraced her again. “Dinner; I am hungry.”

Never doubting her, Challoner left the room, never even attempting to relock the door.

With one spring Mabel locked the door, caught up the coat with breathless haste; she emptied the pockets of the papers they contained, and never looking to see if they were the right ones thrust them into her own jacket-pockets, and almost before Challoner had crossed the hall was through the window and flying for her life down the lawn into the station.

A train was in.

“To London, ma’am?” cried the porter.

“Yes, yes.”

“Jump in then—I’ll get your ticket.” In a moment he was back; the engine gave a shriek, and they were off.

Just as the train glided from the platform Mabel caught sight of Richard Challoner dashing into the station, his face livid with rage.

“Gone!” was Richard’s comment; “but I can yet be revenged.” And hastening to the telegraph-office he dictated the following:

“Richard Challoner, *To* Sir Hugh Stapylton.
 “Westham,

“Sorry can’t dine with you to-morrow, as Mabel A—— is here. This between ourselves.”

“There,” he said, as he turned away, “if he ever speaks to her again after that he is not the man I take him for. Your little game is spoilt, my fair Mabel, despite the possession of those letters.”

When Mabel recovered from the state of nervous excitement into which the last few minutes had thrown her, she took the papers from her pockets and began to examine them. At last she came to some

five or six letters carefully put together in the same envelope.

These were evidently the right ones, and with eager haste she began scanning them—scanning them at first, but turning afterwards to read them with the greatest care and attention.

Having perused them all, she buried her face in her hands, and remained some minutes in deep thought; and then a light broke over her face, and she murmured:

“Hugh dear, I shall be the one to free you from your misery.”

Carefully refolding them, she fastened them into the bosom of her dress, fearing lest any evil chance should cause her to lose the key which was to unlock Sir Hugh’s fetters.

When she reached her own house she went straight to her cosy study, and without waiting to remove her bonnet seated

herself at her writing-table, and with trembling hands and flushed cheeks wrote :

“Wednesday, 6.30 P.M.”

Then she paused. “He’ll think me mad to write thus !” and she took another sheet and again wrote the same.

“How stupid I am,” she said, and began to tear the third letter up. Something stayed her.

“I feel as though I must put the hour,” she said. “I will do it,” and taking another sheet she wrote the words that afterwards she thanked heaven for having guided her to write.

“35, — Square, S.W.,

Wednesday, November 15th, 6.30 P.M.

“DEAR SIR HUGH,

“Pray come to me at once ; I have something of great importance to tell you—

something which, I trust, will restore your happiness.

“Yours with all sincerity,

“MABEL AINSWORTHY.”

Having endorsed this “Important—to be forwarded,” and despatched it by hand to Sir Hugh’s club, Mabel waited.

Her messenger returned with the intelligence that Sir Hugh was expected momentarily, but that the letter should be forwarded if he did not come before night.

The evening passed, but Sir Hugh did not call; the next day, and the next, until a week had gone by; then Mabel got anxious, and sent her servant again to the club to make inquiries. He was told Sir Hugh had not called for the last few days. The man, who had his wits about him, further inquired if the letter had been

forwarded, and after a brief search, the waiter returned with the letter and many apologies for the neglect, and gave Sir Hugh's address.

Miss Ainsworthy's servant, with all good sense, proceeded at once to the given direction to deliver the letter himself; but on reaching the chambers, he was informed that Sir Hugh had gone abroad the Wednesday before, and left no address; as soon as they heard they would forward the letter with several others they had to send.

Sad news this to take back to his poor mistress. Unaccountable news she thought it. Why should he have gone away that very night without saying a word to anyone?

Mabel grieved silently and long over it, grieved for him that he must so much longer have to bear his trouble, and for

herself that she could not comfort him, and in that comforting, gain for herself the happiness which she now knew had been wanting to make her life complete.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BITTERNESS OF DEATH.

SIR HUGH STAPYLTON was lounging away the afternoon in his cosy rooms.

It was raw and foggy without, and he had nowhere especial to go but to his club, and no one especially to see when he got there, so he decided he should be better off to stay where he was.

He had not made his mark at college as a young man. He had read with energy when amongst others who were studying, and despite his handsome face and fortune, had been known more as a reading man than a loungeur ; but still he had left college

without leaving any name behind him, thereby greatly disappointing his many admirers and followers.

When he left college, the blight that fell on his life drew him more than ever away from his fellows; and for years he was either travelling, or shut up away from everyone, reading up some one subject, studying some dead language, anything to pass the time and give him oblivion.

All at once he took a fancy to return to town and read there.

He had always been a favourite with the men of his set, and though all had an idea of some misfortune which had fallen on him, no one knew to a certainty what it was; and whenever he was unearthed by anyone of his set, it was a signal for the others to gather round and give "poor Hugh" a good time.

When he finally decided to live in London—after the *dénouement* about

Cecie—he was determined not to seek out any of his old friends ; and as he had been absent about five years, he had no fear of being recognised.

He was wrong. He had not been established in his chambers a week, before ascending the stairs one afternoon he met an old college chum. Sir Hugh hoped to escape unnoticed, but hoped in vain, and from that time his old friends gradually drew him from his shell, and into their own circle.

One took him home to see his wife ; another his mother and sisters. He found it impossible to resist these kindly advances, and gradually drifted into the calm happy sea of friendship.

But as his friends grew more numerous, his studies decreased ; and he was now constantly reminded by the familiar faces of his books, lying unopened on the table

or in the shelves, that he had neglected his old friends for his new ones.

Sudden fits of industry and remorse would overtake him on dull or unoccupied days like the present, and he would return to some of the old books that had been such good friends to him in the early days of his sorrow.

In one of these moods this afternoon, he had chosen a comfortable chair, a good cigar, an old and tried holder, and searching for a book to interest him, he settled himself beside the fire, devoutly hoping not to be disturbed.

A couple of hours passed. It was just striking six, when the door opened, and a burly bronzed man came striding towards him.

“By Jove Meltham! Where in the world have you sprung from?” asked Sir Hugh. “Find yourself a chair man, and

touch the bell ; we will have a brew that will do both body and soul good this raw day. Take a baccy ; you'll find lights and a holder on that table."

"Now then," as his friend seated himself, "tell me your news."

"Well Stapylton, I'll begin by telling you I've only half-an-hour to stay."

"What, off again ?"

"Yes, I hate these English winters, and if I wait for the fogs to settle on my chest I am a dead man ; so I am off on a tour this very day. I mean to cruise through the Mediterranean, Red Sea, have a look at India, perhaps on to Japan, and home again in May."

"Very jolly too. You make me wish I was going to give the *Mona* another trial."

"I wish you were. That's the bother of it ; I've no one going with me. I asked Lorrel, his mother's dying ; Delamere's engaged. All my hopes are centred on

Westmacott and Merten, who have half-promised to join me at Nice. I wanted to ask you, but Lorrell said he thought it would be impossible to get you away from town, and hinted at petticoats. I suppose soon I shall have to congratulate some girl on securing so good a fellow, and commiserate myself on the loss of a friend."

"I wish to heaven you could!"

"Well, if she can't make up her mind, a little absence is a capital thing; come with me for a time."

"You don't understand Meltham; she is the one woman in the world," and Sir Hugh turned away, and puffed moodily at his cigar.

Meltham was silent. He had a faint recollection of something unfortunate happening to Stapylton, but what in the world it was, he could not recollect; so he only said, after a pause:

"Well, of course you won't come?"

"No, it's quite impossible. I've given up knocking about, and settled quietly down here. I shan't care to travel any more."

Then the talk drifted into other channels. Meltham was just rising to take his leave, when Sir Hugh's man brought in a telegram.

"I wonder who the deuce it is from," he commented as he opened it.

Meltham, busied in lighting a cigar, did not notice the agonised expression that crossed his friend's face, as he read the message.

Again and again Sir Hugh read it through, as though he could not grasp its contents. He stared vacantly at the paper before him, and passed his hand through his hair, with the air of a man who wishes to realise that he really lives, and has his senses.

He was dreaming. It could not be true.

Then his eye fell on Meltham, and he felt that it was a cruel reality.

Slowly he drooped his head on his hands, clenching them on the telegram in an agony that was too deep for words ; biting his lips till they bled, to crush back the anguished groan that rose to them.

In that moment when he read that she, who was to him the embodiment of goodness and purity, was but like other women, he longed for death ; he did not care to live ; he was like a lost soul suffering the torments of hell.

There was but a few seconds before Meltham turned and noticed him ; but he lived a lifetime in them.

He had been a man in the prime of his life before he read the telegram ; but he looked old and broken when Meltham looked at him. Guessing from his attitude that something was wrong, he went to him, and said in kindly tones :

"No bad news I hope, old fellow?"

"Bad news!" Sir Hugh said, repeating the words mechanically, and as he spoke raising his haggard face and bloodshot eyes.

"Good God!" Meltham cried, starting back. "Hugh old man, rouse yourself. Here, take this," and he reached some brandy, and with gentle force compelled him to drink it. Though a little revived his eyes still wore that terrifying stare. Meltham tended him with a wondrous care, and was at last rewarded by hearing him draw a long breath.

"Old friend, old friend, what can I do for you?" he asked. He had not seen much illness, and he thought that Sir Hugh was dying. "What is it that troubles you so?"

"Troubles me," Sir Hugh echoed, and with a low moan he buried his face in his hands, his whole frame shaken with deep sobs.

How terrible it is to see a man weep ! to see a strong chest torn with sobs of agony ; to see the drawn face, the closed eyes, through which hardly a tear comes to relieve their burning ; every line in face and form expressing the storm of pain that rages within. What woman's sorrow can compare with it ! The pain that vents itself in a sudden gush of tears, is but a babbling brook to a mighty rushing river.

When men feel sorrow it crushes them utterly for the time, and then they rise up and throw it off ; with women it is so different. They have so few things to divert their thoughts from it. The trivialities of a woman's life are utterly insufficient to enable her to forget. She carries the heavy load of pain about with her daily and hourly. It rises with her, follows her like her shadow through all the waking hours, and then, when night

comes and she hopes for relief, the phantom follows her in dreams, till she wakes shuddering and frightened, and, for a moment, thinks it has all been a dream, and rejoices she is awake, when an icy hand fixes on her heart. She starts with the sudden agony, and realises once more that this is no dream, but a stern bitter reality.

Oh the pain of that sudden heart-grip!
Oh the agony of another day to face and live through! Such sorrow as this cannot weep ; tears can bring no relief to such a bowed heart as this. Does such pain bring one nearer to the hour of release? How gladly would death be welcomed to give relief from such an agony of pain. No hereafter can be more terrible than the awful present—that present which is so overwhelming that there seems no beyond. The future is desolate ; life stretches before one an

arid plain—no green spots, no pleasant brooks to allay the heart's parching thirst ! All is bleak, and bare, and desolation walks abroad in the noonday, shutting out the light of the sun with his fell presence.

Some say at times like these, why look on things in so morbid a light ? why not take up your life and do the best you can with it, and look on the bright side ? But at the supreme moment, when the blow has fallen and every nerve and fibre is quivering under it, there is no bright side. Life may be faceted like a crystal, and yet it will give forth no brightness ; light is dead.

Grief like this must shorten the span of suffering years allotted to us. It must—a grief that has to be borne alone, and away from all others ; a grief that must be hidden from all, especially from the one who has caused it, lest some tremor in the voice, some droop in the

aching eyes, may give them a glance into the mirror in which the heart's workings are reflected.

Oh the pain of it—the pain of it! Bearing it with smiling lips and light words, never for one instant daring to let it be free, lest others should see it in your face. Battling it down and forcing it away, even when you are alone with it, till it settles in a cruel pain at the heart, which you long for death to remove.

Oh why is life so bitter? Are there some of us to whom happiness will ever be but an empty phrase? who will fancy it within their grasp, and stretch out aching arms towards it, to find they have been trying to catch a sunbeam, to clasp a rainbow.

Life is long, and joy is fleeting. Oh hope! oh joy! shall I never make you mine?

But to return to Sir Hugh. Meltham stood beside him irresolute. He could not tell what to do; he was unwilling to be left alone with him, and still more unwilling to call the man in, and let him see his master thus. He took some brandy himself, and stood with his hand laid gently on his friend's shoulder, waiting.

By-and-by Sir Hugh rose, and calming himself with a mighty effort, grasped his friend's hand.

"Dear old fellow" he said, and his voice sounded strange and far away, "you said you had no one going with you, will you let me come?"

Meltham answered huskily. "Do, I'll wait a day or two if you like."

"No, no," Sir Hugh said, beginning to pace the room excitedly, "I want to be off at once, I'll come with you now."

"But your traps."

“I can take a few things now, and Mason can bring the rest by train and join us at Dover.”

Ringing, he gave all the necessary instructions to his valet, asked for his hat and gloves, and a minute later they were in the street. Sir Hugh gave a start as he found the telegram still crushed in his hand; he wavered a moment, whether he should tear it up and throw it away, then he folded it, and placed it carefully in his pocketbook.

On what a frail thread our happiness hangs! Sir Hugh was deliberately destroying his.

CHAPTER VIII.

FLIGHT.

LADY MAINWARING was particularly fond of riding. It had always been her favourite mode of exercise, and now, when she found herself mistress of a capital stud, never a day passed without seeing her in the saddle.

She had always had a penchant too for hunting, but this had been rigorously snubbed by Miss FitzAlleyn, who, looking upon her as a saleable article, did not wish her beauty spoiled before she was disposed of. Now however, her husband cared very little either for her beauty or her neck, so

she was free to hunt as often as she pleased. Sometimes Sir Herbert would accompany her. Though he did not care for her, he was quite alive to the fact that she looked remarkably well on horseback, and he enjoyed the sensation her appearance in the field created.

Two mornings after the writing of the letter to the FitzAlleyns, there was a meet in the neighbourhood of the Hall.

Cecie was bent on going, and asked her husband to take her. Something had occurred to ruffle his temper, and he declined to go, asking Geoffrey to take care of his wife instead.

Louise Challoner would not hunt, so Darrell was to drive her to the throw-off, and he looked forward with some pleasure to the idea of having her in his care till Cecie returned.

Lady Mainwaring was in high spirits; once fairly out of the house, and through

the lodge gates, she could not keep them down, but laughed and chatted to Geoffrey so brightly that he began to hope things were happier for her.

She was enjoying the whole thing immensely. The soft gray mist that lay over everything seemed to her as though she were in Fairyland, and this gauzy veil had been drawn over the earth by some kindly fairy, who would presently wave her wand, and—Hey! Presto!—it would roll away, and reveal a scene of untold beauty. Then her thoughts came down from the land of visions, and she wondered what sort of a run they would have. Was not Geoffrey sure it would be a good run? She was; she felt as though she were going to enjoy herself to the full, only she wished Herbert were but there, and then her every thought would be gratified.

“I never felt so content in my life,” she said; “I am thoroughly happy this

morning." And long afterwards Geoffrey remembered her words.

Everything went merrily as a marriage-bell. The hounds were put into covert, soon found, and, after rattling their fox about for some time, forced him into the open, and the scent being good, the field was soon enjoying what afterwards proved to be one of the best runs of the season.

Cecie was a fearless rider. Sitting well down in her saddle, and getting her horse well in hand, she was away with the first flight; and, taking her fences like a bird, maintained her forward position during the whole of the run, and if in the excitement she thought at all, it was but to revel in the exhilaration of the moment.

She was one of the few in at the death; and then came the first pang that had crossed her heart since she woke—her husband was not by her to share her

pride when she was presented with the brush.

“An out-and-out good run,” was the universal opinion as the rest of the straggled field came up.

The one wild excitement over, the keen ones—and Cecie was one of the number—were impatient for another, and waited anxiously while the hounds were thrown in to try an adjoining covert.

But if the riders had no consideration for their horses Dame Fortune had, and by the turn of her wheel ordained that the covert should be drawn blank.

A whimper or two was heard from young inexperienced hounds, but the sages of the pack never lifted their voices, and reynard not being at home the huntsman got his hounds together, and those who had waited, agreeing with the master that the good run they had had was sufficient for one day, gradually the field dropped off, and

Cecie reluctantly turned her horse's head towards home ; Geoffrey seeing her to the Hall, and then riding away on some business.

She reached home about three, and as she crossed the threshold inquired for the guests and her husband.

"Miss Challoner and Mr. D'Eyncourt are out walking, my lady," the butler replied ; "but Sir Herbert has gone out alone. He left word that he would return at six, and wanted particularly to see you when he returned, my lady."

Cecie walked through the hall, wondering what he could possibly want with her, and on up the stairs to her own room. As she passed her husband's dressing-room something prompted her to look in. A letter was lying on the floor, and beside it Sir Herbert's pencilcase. He had evidently dropped them.

"Careless boy !" she exclaimed, and went forward to pick them up.

The letter was addressed to herself, and had been opened. A feeling of deadly fear came over her as she looked at it and recognised the writing. Slowly she took the letter from its envelope, and read it.

“You questioned the tie between us when I asked you for money as from friend to friend. Now, I demand assistance from a child to her mother.

“—— I shall make it my business to inform your husband—at what an early age your talent for acting was cultivated. It will in some measure prepare him for the domestic tragedy which is likely to ensue on his looking up the history of your relatives, the Wolvermeres.”

Cecie felt stunned as she realised that her husband had read this too, and knew all. A new spirit seemed to possess her; she felt eager to fly from him. Much as she

loved him, she dared not face him ; and as she stood there with the letter clasped in her hands, she began turning over in her mind the means of escape.

She must be prompt ; Herbert would be back at six, and then he would tax her with her falsity and duplicity. If she went at all, she must go before he returned. Should she face him ? Should she throw herself on his mercy, and ask him to forgive her ?

It was a wild thought, but for a moment it seemed the best course to pursue. Then crowding back on her memory came the words he had used when that first letter came :

“ I swear to you, that if I found you had deceived me about your relationship with those women, I would put you away from me, and never look on your false face again.”

Herbert would never forgive her. If she

waited till he returned, it would only be putting off the hour of her being thrust out of his home and presence. How much better to go away before she had seen him and heard the hard things he was sure to say. Her memories of him would be so much sweeter.

Her decision was made: she would go. Passing on to her own room, she rang and ordered the carriage to be brought round at once.

Marie, returning to dress her mistress, and entering without being observed, found her busily packing a bag. The woman was faithful and honest, and loved her young mistress devotedly. She had noticed Sir Herbert's neglect, and seeing the agitation on her lady's face, and the amateur packing that was going on, she, with all a French woman's keenness, connected the two ideas, and instantly surmised that her ladyship was going to run away.

With a sob, she fell on her knees before her.

“Oh miladi, do not leave me ; I will be quiet, discreet, anything you wish, only take me with you.”

Lady Mainwaring was disconcerted, though the woman's honest pleading touched her ; she had been so anxious that no one should know of her intentions. It was no use attempting to deny what was so palpably a fact, so she only said kindly :

“No, Marie, I cannot take you ; I am going away for ever, and should not want you.”

“Not want me ! *Mais* miladi, how will you get your coiffure arranged ? who will robe you ? Miladi must have someone to dress her.”

“No Marie, indeed. I shall be very poor, and perhaps have to work for myself.”

“Work ! you, miladi ? Marie will come and work for you,” and she urged her plea so earnestly that at last Cecie gave in, and gave her the desired permission ; and then took her into her council as to how she could best get away.

Marie hit upon a capital plan.

“You miladi, will take your money and jewels with you at once, and drive to Star’s the milliner at Staveley. You should dismiss the carriage there to call for you again at six. As soon as you can manage, you will go down to the station and get the 5.30 express. I will pack all the dresses, linen, and things I think you are likely to want, and take them all to my room. Then I will say to the under-gardener : I have a sweetheart to whom I am *fiancée* ; I cannot bear to part with miladi, and I must go to my sweetheart, so I have made up my mind to go my ways before she returns. Will you take my boxes to the

station, so that no one sees—to the Kelving Station, which is but half-a-mile from here? Take the cart, and cover the boxes with straw to conceal them; and while you do that, I will to the servants' hall, and tell them the fortunes I promised to. Miladi will get in at Staveley. The next station is Kelving. Miladi will see Marie there, but she will not notice her till London is reached; and then, all will be well."

Cecie thought the plan a good one, and in her anxiety and trouble could not think of a better one; so bidding Marie hasten her preparations, she dressed hurriedly, and collected all her jewels into a dressing-bag. Those secured, she thought of ways and means, and taking out her purse, found to her horror she had not five pounds in it.

What could she do? She paused a few minutes, and then remembered that her husband had had a large sum paid him late

the day before, and had locked it in his escritoire in the library. There was just the chance that he had not yet taken it to the bank.

She hurried down the stairs in terror lest her husband or her guests should meet her, and, locking the library door, went to the writing-table. The drawers were locked; in her excitement she had never realised that such would of course, be the case; but she did not let it be an obstacle. A dagger, which Sir Herbert used as a paper-knife, was lying on the table. In an instant she had it in the drawer, forcing it open. Two minutes of uncertainty, and then it yielded with a crash.

A quantity of notes and gold lay before her. Without waiting to count the money she crammed it into her bag, and seeing the carriage pass the window, unlocked the door, and walked out of the house with a firm step—though her heart felt breaking

with the double crime she was committing—robbing her husband, and then leaving him.

“The Staveley Bank,” she said to the footman, as he closed the carriage-door.

Half-an-hour brought her to her destination ; but to her dismay the bank was closed.

She was turning away, when the old clerk, who had seen and recognised the carriage through the bank’s wire blinds, issued forth, and asked her commands.

Cecie descended from the carriage, and, entering the bank, produced the notes.

“Give me this in gold, please.”

The old man stared.

“There’s four hundred and sixty pounds here, my lady,” he said, turning them over with his thumb.

“I know,” she said calmly.

“But my lady, it will be so heavy?” he objected.

“Have I not my carriage?” she asked haughtily.

“Pardon me,” and he bowed gravely and left her, in a minute returning with four canvas bags, which he handed to her. Lady Mainwaring placed them in her dressing-bag, and waited with no apparent impatience while he counted out the remaining sixty sovereigns.

Then, thanking the old clerk for attending to her out of hours, she went quietly back to her carriage, leaving him intensely curious and mystified.

“I wonder what she wants all that gold for?” he said to himself. “I’ll find out where she is going.”

“Star and Glover’s,” he heard the order given in Lady Mainwaring’s quiet voice.

“Ah! ha!” he said. “She’s got a heavy dress bill to pay, and wants the gold so that her husband sha’n’t be able to trace it; and she’s a bride of a few months!”

The old clerk shook his gray head, and went back to his books a wiser man in the world's ways.

Lady Mainwaring followed Marie's instructions to the letter, finding neither let nor hindrance in so doing, and when the 5.30 train drew up she quietly stepped into it, without seeming to notice Marie's anxious face, thrust out of a window close at hand.

The whistle was blown, the train rolled out of the station, and mistress and maid were clear away.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DISCOVERY.

MISS CHALLONER and young D'Eyncourt had daily been finding greater pleasure in each other's society.

Though Darrell had been very much attached to Cecie, he was far too honourable a man to think of her now but as his friend's wife ; and the wound that at the time had been a very grievous one, had been soothed and healed by Louise Challoner, till it was no more than the shadow of an old pain long dead.

Cecie's interest still lay very near his heart ; but he thought of her as he would

have thought of a dear sister, nothing more.

All the love that he had driven back into his heart for Cecie was now being slowly drawn forth by dainty little Louise. She saw it and knew it—women are very keen in such matters—and though she loved him with all her heart, she would not let him see it. She teased him, and coaxed him, till Darrell felt quite bewildered; but the moment he attempted to say anything approaching sentimentality she would laugh merrily, and so persistently make fun of him that he felt in despair.

On the day of the hunt they had started for a brisk walk, and returning, had gone to the billiard-room, and after whiling away a desultory hour over the fire and afternoon tea, had started a game at billiards, which proved more amusing to Louise than to Darrell.

She played in a most ladylike manner,

holding her cue like a spoon, and crumpling her little hand into all sorts of agonising positions, which were utterly useless as rests. She always played with such tremendous force that nine times out of ten she put the red in baulk; occasionally she would pocket a ball; but as a rule, nothing resulted from her stroke but such a complete scattering of the balls that it was only by superhuman effort that anything at all would be made; and Darrell had to feel contented to see his score slowly growing through his adversary's misses. A hard trial this for a good billiard-player, however much in love.

After a while Louise began to wonder where Lady Mainwaring could be; and, at last, as she did not come in, went to dress for dinner.

A few minutes later Darrell, in crossing the hall, met Sir Herbert.

"Just come in, old fellow?" he asked.

Mainwaring just nodded, and began to question the butler :

“Has her ladyship come in yet, Soames?”

“Yes Sir Herbert. Her ladyship came in about three, and ordered the carriage almost immediately, and has not yet returned.”

“Let me know directly she does,” his master said.

“You’ll wait dinner, Sir Herbert?”

“Why?”

“It’s a quarter to seven.”

“No ; let dinner be served at the right time,” and he went up to his room.

Dinner-time came, but Lady Mainwaring did not make her appearance. Sir Herbert tried to seem at his ease, but questioned Geoffrey eagerly whether he had heard Cecily say anything about going for a drive. Geoffrey did not remember, but he began to feel a vague sense of uneasiness creeping over him.

It was but a dull dinner. All rose together to go to the drawing-room. As they entered, the ormolu clock chimed out half-past eight.

Sir Herbert could no longer control his anxiety, but paced up and down the room in a fever, wondering what could have become of her.

Who has not felt the horrors of suspense, waiting and watching for one to return, till the minutes become hours and the hours centuries? At one moment anger swells the heart against the absentee, and an arrival at such a moment would be by no means a pleasant one; then, as the leaden-footed moments drag by, fear overmasters all other emotions, and all the bitterness is gone, leaving only an intense longing for a glimpse of the expected face. The hearing becomes doubly acute, every footstep, every sound is caught by the strained ears; it is impossible to try

to read or work, impossible to settle to anything but watching and listening; while through the brain flit countless ghastly thoughts of the horrors that may have occurred—visions of lifeless forms being borne to their homes, of broken limbs, fractured skulls, messengers bearing woful tidings, till at last the well-known foot-step comes by, and the missing one returns provokingly well, happy, and jolly, and not in any way disposed to be grateful for the misery his defalcation has caused, but far more inclined to grumble at the long face with which he was greeted.

Had Cecily returned at this moment her husband would have received her with open arms, and been only too thankful she had returned, even though he was furious against her and meant to upbraid her for having so basely deceived him.

All the afternoon he had been pondering

how to separate from her without causing any public scandal.

He was determined she should no longer live with him ; and as there was not sufficient plea for a divorce, he decided against the scandal of a legal separation, and had half made up his mind to go abroad at once.

As the moments passed and Cecie did not return, the soft feeling vanished ; and as he strode up and down the room a heavy frown gathered on his brow, and he began to be furious with her for causing him this anxiety.

A perfect tempest gathered in his breast ; his anger grew fiercer every moment ; he was forced to restrain it ; and it was well for Cecie she was not at hand for him to wreak his rage upon.

In that hour he would have been glad to see her lying dead at his feet, and to know

that the disgrace she had brought upon him had died with her. The wives of the Mainwarings had always been women of family, and he ground his teeth to think he had been the one to besmirch their hitherto unsullied escutcheon.

Nine o'clock struck, and roused him from his reverie. He rang the bell, and desired Soames to come to him.

The old butler entered with a rather scared face.

"Has her ladyship returned?" asked his master.

"No Sir Herbert; the carriage has returned, but without my lady."

"What can this mean?" cried the baronet; "and what does Charles mean by returning home without his mistress; send him to me at once."

The interview with the coachman elicited very little further. He had waited all the afternoon outside Star's, and when the

footman saw them beginning to close the shop, he had gone in to inquire if Lady Mainwaring were still there; he had then learnt that her ladyship had been there early in the afternoon, and after buying some gloves had walked through the shop, and left it by the door in Queen Street. The coachman then thought the best thing to do was to return home at once, and had done so.

Had they stopped at any other place besides Star's?

At the bank; her ladyship was in there a few minutes after it had closed.

Sir Herbert dismissed the man, and paced the library for a few moments; then he threw himself down in the chair placed at his writing-table, and thought over the coachman's statement again. As he did so his hand wandered idly amongst the papers and litter on the table, and lighted on the steel paper-knife he always used. As at

such moments little things will occupy the attention, when great things are at stake, so the paper-knife for a moment absorbed his thoughts. He noticed the handle, admired its beautiful damascene work, then looking at the blade he discovered it was bent and notched. How could that have happened? He was so careful of the knife, and thought so much of it. A little splinter of wood was adhering to it—something had been forced open. In an instant he glanced towards the drawer in which he had placed the money. It was a little way open, and empty.

At first he felt dazed at the second minor misfortune, following so quickly on the greater one; then the whole thing flashed across him—Cecily had stolen the money and left him. At first the true reason did not occur to him, then the idea crossed his mind that by some means or other she must have got wind of the letter from Miss Fitz-

Alleyn, and fled from his anger. He put his hand in his pocket to search for the letter he had intercepted. It was not there; he remembered changing his coat, and went upstairs to look, but there was no letter. In crossing the floor he stepped on something, and stooping to pick it up saw his pencilcase, and near it some coppers. Then the whole thing was as clear as daylight to him; he had dropped the letter out of his pocket, his wife had found it, and taken flight before he returned.

His idea of hushing things up could not be carried out. He must brave the world's remarks, shut up the Hall, and go abroad for a time.

He went slowly down the stairs, and entering the drawing-room, begged his brother and Darrell to come to the library with him.

When the door was closed he turned and faced the two men.

"Her ladyship has run away," he said quietly.

"Good God!" Geoffrey exclaimed.

"In heaven's name, where has she gone to?" queried Darrell.

"I neither know nor care," Sir Herbert said brutally.

"Herbert!" broke from both men.

"I mean what I say. I had found out who and what she was, and meant to put her away quietly; but as she has taken the law into her own hands, and forced a scandal on me, I mean to close the Hall, and go abroad till next season, when I shall go into Leicestershire for the hunting."

"And your wife; what of her?" Geoffrey said sarcastically.

"I have done with her from this moment. The illegitimate child of an actress shall never be wife of mine."

"What!" cried Darrell, starting up.

"I can prove what I say. I read a letter

this morning addressed to Lady Mainwaring, from Miss FitzAlleyn, signed ‘Your affectionate mother,’ and seeking to extort money from her; and in the event of her refusing, threatening to tell me all. Her ladyship found the letter, broke open my writing-table, and having stolen nearly five hundred pounds, has gone off. She can do as she pleases now; she has feathered her nest pretty well, and won’t trouble me till she has got through what she stole.”

“Herbert, you have no right to speak of Cecily in that way, nor must you act as you intend to. She is your wife recollect, to cherish and protect, and nothing could justify you in casting her adrift on the world so long as she is a good wife to you.”

“I want nothing to justify me,” Sir Herbert said. “I am justified in myself. She grossly wronged me, and basely deceived me; and had she stayed to meet me, I should have told her that from this

moment she should cease to be a wife to me. She dared not stay to face me, plainly showing she was conscious of her sin, and if I wanted any justification, she has given it me."

"I think," Geoffrey said severely, "that your unfortunate misguided wife fled because she feared your brutality. I have not been blind all this while; I have seen her yearning for kindness from you, and receiving instead words far worse than blows. That poor girl's life has been a torment, a misery to her. I don't blame her for concealing the truth from you. Have you ever given her a chance? You forced her, through abject fear, to write that last letter to those women. You never gave her any encouragement to be frank and open with you. You have brought it all on yourself, Herbert. At heart that girl was as good a woman as ever breathed; she was a wife in whose keeping any man might safely trust

his honour; and had you only chosen to mould her, would have been all you could have desired. But no; you repressed her affection, snubbed and ill-treated her. Was she warm and loving, you became cold and distant; and did anything occur to worry you, treated her to all your rough words until the edge had worn off your annoyance. A timid girl like Cecily would naturally have feared violence, after the language you used over the first letter from her aunts, and when she found the second one and learned that you were already master of its contents, it is not to be wondered at that she ran away; woman-like preferring to brave dangers of which she knew nothing, than face a squall of whose extent she was perfectly cognisant. There was much good in Cecily; but what have you done with her finer and better nature? You have trampled it under foot, and treated her with little short of tyranny.

And why? Because she felt herself daily growing more like those horrible women who brought her up, and accepted you without caring more for you than as a means of liberating herself. Had she known what she was doing when she married so thoughtlessly, she would have hesitated; but she was so young. She was wrong to hide the secret of her birth from you; but again, why should the innocent suffer for the guilty? Why should she be a Pariah for the sin of her mother?"

"That homily is all very well Geoffrey," his brother answered calmly; "but it cannot alter the fact that she has wronged me deeply. I devoutly thank heaven that she has gone."

"And do you mean to take no steps to find her?" cried Darrell.

"Most certainly not."

"Shame on you then. But she shall

not be deserted. I will take on myself the task of finding her, and will not rest till she is safely placed amongst friends."

"I will join you in your search," said Geoffrey, grasping Darrell's hand. "I trust that in a few days we may have found her; and then Herbert, my first steps will be to secure from you a liberal allowance for her."

Sir Herbert scowled, but made no reply.

"Let us start at once," urged Darrell.

"We will, if possible. I will go and question the servants, to get any further information I can from them, and you might be preparing for the start meanwhile."

"What about Miss Challoner?" Darrell asked suddenly.

"Oh," Sir Herbert rejoined gloomily; "you can tell her all. I will not see her; so you must let her understand that

this house is no longer a fit place for her to remain in, and that she had better go home."

Strange emotions were at work within Darrell's heart as he passed from the library to the drawing-room. He was infuriated with Sir Herbert for thus treating his unfortunate young wife, and felt only profound pity for poor misguided Cecie. Then, again, he shrank from his task of telling Louise and opening her pure eyes to the miseries of the world.

When he entered the room she was seated at the piano, softly playing snatches of melody. Agitation made him bold. He took her hands from the piano, and looked into the gentle upturned face.

"What is the matter?" she asked, reading in his looks that something serious had occurred. "Oh Mr. D'Eyncourt, is Lady Mainwaring ill?"

“No,” he said gently; “but something very serious has happened.”

She rose and stood beside him.

“Tell me,” she said simply.

Darrell essayed to speak, but as he looked into the innocent eyes words failed him, and he could only gaze silently and sadly at her.

She grew impatient, and moved towards the door.

“Let me go to her,” she said. Darrell laid a gentle restraining hand on her shoulder, and stooping over her, he said:

“You cannot go to her, Louise; she has left her home, and we don’t know where she is.”

Louise drooped her head, and waited for more. Darrell continued:

“She has fled from Sir Herbert’s cruelty.”

She raised her head; the soft mouth was quivering with pity and sympathy.

“Yes, and having driven her away, he

does not mean to make any effort to find her; but neither Geoffrey nor I can bear to think of that poor child adrift and friendless, so we are starting almost immediately in quest of her, and I have come to bid you good-bye, Louise."

"I am so glad you are going to look for her," Louise said softly, raising her eyes big with tears. "It is indeed too dreadful to think of her alone in the world. Oh Mr. D'Eyncourt, how good you are to go after her!"

"Good!" he answered, "I would as soon hear that you had left home and friends as poor Cecily. Louise, this sudden trouble makes me speak words I had meant should remain unsaid a little longer: child, you are dearer to me than life itself; can you love me a little in return?"

His face was very near hers now, and he strove gently to raise it, and gazed lovingly on the flushed cheeks and the white lids

that could not be lifted from the shy eyes."

"Look up, my darling," he pleaded, but she, with a soft gesture, drew her head away, and whispering :

"No, no ; it is wrong to be happy now," buried her burning cheeks on his shoulder.

For a moment he held her to him, then bending over her, pressed upon her fresh young lips love's first sweet kiss.

"Mine for ever," he murmured, and the shy smile on Louise's face seemed to say she was well contented it should be so.

Some time later Geoffrey came in with the unwelcome intelligence that they could not possibly catch the last train, and must therefore wait for the morning.

He believed Cecily had gone to London, and meant to cross over to France. Her maid had also left that afternoon, taking a quantity of luggage with her, and had told the man who helped her to get the boxes

away, that she was returning to her own country, though when he spoke of it five minutes later, she denied having said so.

As there was nothing more to be done that night, they decided to go to bed at once, to be ready for an early start in the morning, and it was arranged that Louise should accompany them to town.

CHAPTER X.

CRUSHED.

FROM amongst a heap of papers and bills that lay on the breakfast-table, Maud Fitz-Alleyn picked out a letter that bore Cecie's handwriting. She glanced at it, then dropped it with a loud cry.

"What is the matter dear?" Lyn asked, looking up from *The Morning Post*.

"I wish to goodness you would mind your own business."

"It must be bad news; tell me, whom is the letter from?"

"What in the world is that to you?"

"Everything," Lyn answered temperately.

“Come Maud, don’t be silly. What concerns you must concern me, our lives have been too closely interwoven for a blow to fall on one without touching the other; we must each take our own share of the calamity.”

“Well as you are so anxious for yours, pray take it, and enjoy it,” Maud said savagely, tossing the letter across. “Cecie has gone, and I wish I had been hanged before I wrote that last note to her.”

“Cecie gone! What do you mean?”

“Read the letter and you will find out.”

Lyn read it out. It ran thus :

“Before this reaches you, I shall have left my home for ever, and you will have the satisfaction of knowing that it is through you I have gone. My husband has seen both your letters; after the first one he threatened to turn me out of his house if any tie really existed between us;

and your second letter he had opened during my absence. I dare not wait to face him; and through my mother's kindness am forced to leave my husband, and seek refuge from his violence in the world.

"I am sorry for you, you have killed the goose that might have laid you countless golden eggs.

"CECILY MAINWARING."

"Oh Maud!" Lyn gasped, when she had read the letter through. "Poor child! what can we do?"

"That is precisely what I am thinking, for if we fail to raise money somehow, we shall be in a pretty mess."

"I did not mean that, Maud," Lyn said impatiently. "I was thinking of poor Cecie. She was an incubus, but I cannot bear to think of her alone, and goodness knows where. Let us search for her, sister;

we have a right to look after her—let us find her and bring her back to live with us again. A pretty young thing like that ought not to be left unprotected.”

“Lyn, you are a mad idiot,” was all Miss FitzAlleyn vouchsafed; after a few moments she went on, “If the girl is foolish enough to leave a good home, for a sentimental notion, she must bear the consequences, I don’t intend to keep her again.”

“Then at least let us search for her, and put her amongst people she will be safe with,” urged Lyn.

Miss FitzAlleyn brought her hand sharply down on the table.

“Look here Lyn, let’s have no more of this folly. I won’t have anything to do with the girl. She has ruined us, and I would not stir a finger after her. We have quite enough before us in meeting our own debts, without seeking her out and

supporting her. She has made her bed ; let her lie on it."

Lyn made no reply, she was gazing absently into the fire ; apparently she had not heard her sister's speech.

Miss FitzAlleyn's impatience could not brook this inattention. She rose hastily and seized her by the shoulder.

"Do you hear me Lyn? We have troubles enough of our own to think of without taking fresh ones upon us. We are ruined."

"What!" cried Lyn, starting up and confronting her sister.

"Yes, ruined. I kept it all to myself, hoping for a good cheque from that ungrateful Cecily ; but as that has failed there is no denying the fact—ruin is staring us in the face. The man who sold us this house says he must be paid up at once, as he is leaving England. Then the butcher and the baker, and all

the rest of the harpies, say they can give no more credit. What is to be done? We have about thirty pounds to our name at the bank till the next quarter is due from Hugh. He is away, goodness knows where, so we cannot hope for help from him; and, as you know, he withdrew the allowance for Cecily on her marriage. Our pittance is now but a miserable five hundred a-year. What are we to do?"

Lyn was silent, digesting the unpleasant news her sister had given her. After a while she spoke,

"We must leave here."

"How? It's very easy to say we must leave; but perhaps you have not calculated our liabilities; the people here would not let us leave."

"Can't we sell what we have got here and pay?" Lyn said, sighing.

Maud laughed.

“Oh you dreamy old stupid! How are we to live after. With the bills, and the furniture, and the purchase-money of this house, we owe about seven thousand. What we have to sell would fetch about two, and we should be disgraced beggars to the end of our days.”

“I think we shall be more disgraced if we don’t.”

“Lyn, what has come over you. Are you mad?”

“I don’t know,” Lyn said, bursting into tears. “I feel as though I could not bear this life any longer; it kills me. Oh what would I give to have a fresh start; to be an honourable respectable woman! Oh if I only had the chance I would be such a good woman!”

“Well there is nothing to prevent your going back to the old home. I daresay our kind father is still living, and he would do his best to put you out as

housemaid or something of the sort. You'd have to take low wages at first in consequence of having no character."

"Oh Maud, how can you be so cruel!"

"Well, don't be so ridiculous. It is all very well to talk; but you know you would not give up your life of luxury for all the innocence the world contains."

"I would. I would gladly work and gain an honest living, to be free to look other women in the face, to hold up my head amongst them, the honoured wife of a good man. What had I done that all the holiest purest joys should have been put far from me, unattainable, though so madly longed for? What had I done?"

"Why committed the sin of being a good-looking woman, without money or position. Come, let us have done with moralising. We cannot alter the past, but we can mould the future. Put sentiment aside for a little and listen to me. You

suggest we must leave ; but we cannot do that, we must bolt. There is a fine distinction between the words. I shall write to Mr. Tredwin *in re* his precious Sibthorp Manor, that I have had so many calls on me lately that I cannot send him his cheque for a month, but that during that time I return him the title deeds till I can fully settle with him."

"And what then ?"

"Before the month is out, we must be clear away from this."

"But he will have his eye on us, and detain us."

"Then I must frame the letter differently. I know what I can do. I'll write and tell him a relation of mine is dying and I must go and see him at once, and that I have not time to attend to business before I go, but that immediately I return I will settle with him. I will write in the greatest grief and distress, and we will be off to-

morrow before the letter is posted, taking with us everything that is valuable and portable, and get clear away before he has time to think."

"Must we?" sighed Lyn.

"Certainly, unless you would prefer to stay and be torn in pieces by irate Bodminites."

"Very well," Lyn said sadly, and rose to leave the room.

"For goodness' sake put off your languor till the day after to-morrow, and be sensible now. I want you to go quietly about collecting everything that seems saleable. I will get as much silver together as I can, and you get the best china from the drawing-room and those silver carvings, they will fetch a handsome sum. Don't take enough to be noticeable, and let whatever you take be of value; then, with our own clothes and jewels, we shall do very well. We won't take a maid; she would only be in the way

and might perhaps betray us. I rely on you to be prompt ; I shall write my note now, and then come to you," and Maud turned to her writing-table as Lyn left the room.

CHAPTER XI.

STRUGGLING.

IN a small, neat, but poorly-furnished room a girl was seated, a thin dog's-eared book in her hand—studying diligently.

She was tall and very pretty, with a slim rounded figure and a delicate complexion, that hardly seemed in keeping with the dark brown hair that clustered in rings on her forehead. Altogether there was something very incongruous about her ; she was handsomely dressed, and what jewellery she wore was costly though plain, and yet she was to all appearances at home in this simple, almost humble, room.

The door opened, and a neat maid appeared ; she had evidently just been out, and had brought a heavy bag of purchases to show her mistress.

“ Well Marie ! ” says the lady ; and when she speaks the voice is Lady Mainwaring’s, but what is the difference in her—how is she altered ? A closer scrutiny reveals the whole secret. It is the mass of sunny hair that is wanting to make her the Cecie of old—by Marie’s advice she had dyed it a dark brown—and so effectual a disguise has it proved, that only yesterday she passed young D’Eyncourt in the street without being recognised.

“ Madame,” said Marie ; “ I have brought everything necessary for the day ; shall I give directions for the dinner, and return to dress you for your walk ? ”

“ Yes, I think you had better ; and I shall want you to come with me to-

day. I know my part quite well now, and feel confident of getting the engagement."

"Madame, do you think you are strong enough for the stage? The life seems so hard."

"I must do something to live Marie, and I really think I am quite strong enough for the life; and besides, I don't know what else I could do."

"Need you do anything madame? Let Marie work. I can make bonnets, and the like, and earn plenty in that way. Oh madame! do let me work for you; indeed you have not the strength!"

"No Marie! good, faithful girl; you shall stay with me always, and go where I go, but I will work—if you call it working. Why, think how easy my work will be, only a few hours every evening, and I love acting. I hope Mr. Wilmore may be satisfied with me to-day. I have

no secrets from you my faithful friend, so I will tell you why I am so anxious. Mr. Wilmore has said that if I can satisfy him with my rendering of this part, and advance one hundred pounds towards the production of the play, he will give me the heroine's part and a salary of five pounds a week. If I get that I am made. What do you think about it Marie?"

"Will the gentleman say all this in writing?"

"Yes; oh, I will be cautious."

"Then madame, I think it would be a very good thing to do, that is, if you will do it."

"I must Marie, and I shall be so delighted if I can only get this engagement. I shall then be free from this horrid walking-lady work I have had to do lately. They say I do it very well, but I can't be content with it, when I

feel I could be doing so very much better. I think Mr. Wilmore will be disappointed if I fail, for he told me he was sure I could do it if I tried, and he said, when he saw me in 'Contraband,' he was sure I was capable of something much better than that horrid little vulgar part. And if I do get to the ——, shall I not be most fortunate? It is one of the best theatres in town. I have been very lucky so far Marie. Fancy getting an engagement the first time I tried for one!"

"Yes; *le bon Dieu* has been very good to the poor stricken lamb. Wonderful have been His mercies to us, and every hour I praise Him, and each time I tell my beads I will say an *Ave* for madame, that she may have strength to pursue the work she has set herself."

"You are always thinking of me, I believe. Now go and get me my hat,

and tell them I am going out, but that if anyone calls I shall be back at four."

Soon after they were on their way to Mr. Wilmore's.

"Mrs. Maitland," the man announced, ushering them into his master's study.

"My dear Mrs. Maitland—punctuality itself," said Mr. Wilmore rising to greet her, and speaking in a pleasant rich-toned voice. "Brought the part I see. If you don't mind we will get to business at once. You must remember that I am expecting to find a second Mrs. Siddons in you, and that I shall be horribly disappointed if I don't; so you must do your best for my sake. In face and figure you are cut out for the character."

Cecily smiled at the compliment, and without further delay began upon the business in hand.

In the corner sat Marie, a silent, observant, and intensely admiring audience ;

while with book in hand, reading now one part, now another, was Mr. Wilmore, acting himself, and giving distinct individuality to every speech, but yet never losing a word or gesture of Mrs. Maitland's. In the open space that served for a proscenium was Cecie herself—her heart and soul in her work, identifying herself with her part. She was no longer poor misguided Cecily Mainwaring, but the unfortunate heroine of the play, suffering with her, rejoicing with her, feeling every thrill of emotion that must have throbbed in her heart; forgetful of self, but living a new life in the story entrusted to her. It was a fine piece of acting—strong, vigorous, and realistic, and, above all, sympathetic.

When the last word had been spoken, the last scene gone through, there was a short silence, broken only by the sobs of Marie, whose butterfly French heart

had been deeply touched by her mistress's life-like representation.

At last Mr. Wilmore spoke.

"My dear Mrs. Maitland," he said, "let me congratulate you. The part is yours; and I need not prophesy a great success for you. You must feel it all in yourself, and be fully conscious of succeeding—— What is the matter, my dear madam?"—this as Cecie, looking deathly pale, and pressing her hand to her side, had sunk half-fainting into a chair.

Marie rushed to her.

"She is always like this after coming off the stage. I do not believe she is strong enough for the life."

Mr. Wilmore had some brandy ready in a moment, and as he handed it to Marie, he said,

"Let us hope your mistress will get stronger, for talent such as hers ought

not to be hidden away. She must make a great hit."

By-and-by Cecie recovered.

"It is my heart," she said apologetically. "It troubles me like this sometimes, when the excitement is over."

The manager smiled blandly.

"Let us hope it will soon pass away, Mrs. Maitland. I have known many young ladies feel ill effects from over-fatigue and that sort of thing when first they went on the stage, but it passes away in time. Novices who are really clever take things too much to heart at first, and really suffer with the characters they assume. After a while they begin to take things more quietly, as older actresses do; and though they still continue to feel their parts, they do so in a calmer manner, and lose the disagreeable after-effects. It is only a species of nervousness."

“I think that is all, for I am really quite strong,” Cecie said, gazing anxiously in his face to see whether her indisposition had produced a bad effect on him.

“You are strong in talent if not in health,” he answered gallantly, “and I have much pleasure in offering you the engagement. After seeing you in the character, no one else would do it justice in my eyes.”

“And about the hundred pounds, madame?” Marie interrupted.

“That I would gladly waive altogether,” Mr. Wilmore replied; “but as you are so young an actress, and will besides have made such a sudden leap from insignificant parts to a principal, you will be certain to rouse a great deal of jealousy amongst the rest, and through it I may be put to some expense; so to save all bother, I shall let it be understood that you paid me that sum to be brought out.”

"I see," Cecie answered.

Marie fancied her mistress was not feeling well enough to look after her own interests, so came to the fore quietly and unobtrusively.

"Will monsieur write all that down, and state the salary madame is to have?"

"Certainly. We will have a proper agreement. If you will call to-morrow we can sign it," Mr. Wilmore replied, a shade of annoyance crossing his face at Marie's interference. The shrewd Frenchwoman, however, thought there was no time like the present, and nothing daunted by the evident disfavour with which the manager regarded her, said,

"Does not madame think it better to have all settled at once? Madame might take another engagement, or monsieur might change his mind, and give the part to someone else; or, worse still, he might

find the jealousy of his *artistes* so very terrible that he would not dare to give the engagement to madame. Would it not be wise for monsieur to write down what he said, and let it be signed and settled while we are here this morning?"

"Yes, I think it would be nicer to have it all settled at once," Cecie said. "And if you do not mind Mr. Wilmore, I should be glad to have it arranged now. You would give me my agreement, fixing date of production and everything, and also a receipt for the hundred pounds, for which I would give you a cheque."

"Certainly, if you wish it," Mr. Wilmore answered, "though your companion need not have feared my giving the part to anyone else. I think I have as keen an eye for a good speculation as most men, and as I expect great things of you Mrs. Maitland, I should not be likely to let you slip through

my fingers very easily. It is perhaps a good arrangement however, for it makes me sure of you."

After a short delay the agreements were brought in and signed, Mrs. Maitland binding herself to appear in the piece about to be produced as "Florence," at a salary of five pounds per week for the term of three months; and Mr. Wilmore on his part, engaging himself, should the piece not run, to give Mrs. Maitland her choice of characters in whatever succeeded it.

"Well Marie," said Cecily as they left the house and turned their steps homewards, "are you not going to congratulate me? Am I not fortunate in getting all so nicely settled?"

"I can only congratulate madame when I find her health quite sufficient to stand the strain on it," Marie said gravely, almost ominously.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TRUTH AT LAST.

“WHY Mainwaring, old fellow, whatever’s the matter with you ?” was Dick Challoner’s greeting to Sir Herbert, as he met him one afternoon in Pall Mall, a few weeks after Cecie’s flight.

“I should think you know ; I should think all the town knows,” was the surly reply.

“Have you been let in heavily lately, then ? I’ve been about the clubs as usual, but have heard nothing about it.”

Sir Herbert turned and confronted him.

“Come Challoner, no humbugging. Do

you mean to say you have not heard my wife has bolted ? ”

“ What ! Bolted ! On my soul I have never heard a word about it.”

“ I expected to find it in everybody’s mouth ; but I suppose after all, when one vegetates in the country for a few months, one’s most intimate friends forget one’s very existence.”

“ Come Herbert, don’t go on in that strain. No one has forgotten you as far as I know ; and if this has not got wind all the better for you, and her—when you get her back. Where has she gone to, and why ? ”

“ I shall never trouble myself about getting her back. She’s gone, and I have done with her. As for her whereabouts, I know no more where she is than you do.”

“ But who has she gone with ? ”

Sir Herbert turned fiercely.

“ What do you mean ? ”

Challoner laughed.

“My dear boy, you know perfectly well. Is it likely your wife ran away with herself! You ought to have been more careful of a young and pretty woman like that; she would not have run away before the honeymoon was well over if you had not given her too much liberty.”

“I must beg you not to make remarks of that kind about my wife,” Sir Herbert said stiffly. “She has left me, but not for the reason you suppose. I think, whatever her faults, Lady Mainwaring would not have condescended to leave me for another man,” and Sir Herbert bit his lips angrily at the mere notion. He might not love her himself, but he had the consciousness that she loved him wholly and solely, and that his honour was safe in her keeping.

Dick Challoner was completely mystified.

“What does it all mean then?”

“Simply that I found out who she was

by reading a letter from that beautiful woman, her mother; and she found out I knew everything, and ran away before I had time to put her away."

"I am more at sea than ever," said Challoner. "What was it you found out that you did not know before you married her?"

"Everything."

"Why my dear fellow, Stapylton showed me a letter in your own writing saying you were well acquainted with Cecily's past history, and did not wish the subject mentioned. If it had not been for that letter I should have spoken to you."

"You knew all then?"

"Of course I did."

"And yet you never warned me—and I looked on you as my friend."

"I did not know till I was in the church, and I saw those two women. When I knew them they were under another name ;

so when you mentioned your future wife was under the care of a Miss FitzAlleyn, I took no more notice of the name than if you had said Miss Brown or Miss Green. When I saw them I went straight to Stapylton and asked if you knew, and for reply he showed me your letter. We were in the church ; I had no time to do more. Stapylton ought to have told you, and yet I suppose your letter deceived him as well as it deceived me ; though certainly in his position I think he ought to have insisted on explaining things."

"Why in his position?"

"Then you don't yet know all."

"All! Is there more to know?"

"Only that Stapylton is Cecily's father,"
Challoner said calmly.

"Stapylton her father! And you knew all this, and never told me?"

"In the face of your letter——"

"Confound the letter, and you too. Had

you had the spirit of a mouse you would have saved me all this disgrace. You have called yourself my friend, and have been my cruellest foe. Richard Challoner, you are a cur."

"If it were not for the years I have known you, I'd thrash you for that," Challoner cried in a fury, grasping his cane. "As it is, I decline to say another word in the matter. If you wish to know the whole thing, you had better find Sir Hugh, and get it out of him;" and hailing a hansom, Challoner jumped in, and bowled away, before Mainwaring had time to stop him.

His blood was on fire. He was determined to get to the end of this matter, now it had gone so far; so, entering his club, he began inquiring from everyone he knew if anything had been heard of Stapylton lately.

No one knew where he was.

A messenger was despatched to his club

for his address, but returned with the intelligence that they did not know where he was; there were a great many letters waiting for him, but he had never written or sent for them since he last left town.

Mainwaring fumed. Find him he would; but how and where? Where should he go first? He was half-inclined to wait a few days, to see if he could get any clue to his neighbourhood, when a man he knew slightly accosted him with,

“Were you inquiring for Stapylton?”

“Yes; I am most anxious to know where he is at the present time. Can you tell me?”

“He is with Meltham, on board the *Mona*; they have been cruising about the Mediterranean for the last month or two, and were talking, when I saw them last week, of laying-up at Naples for a few days, and then saying good-bye to civilised lands for a while. They had not decided where

to go : Meltham was for making straight for Japan, while Stapylton wanted to go first to Calcutta."

"Last week you say ? How long did they talk of stopping at Naples ?"

"Only a few days I believe."

"Do you think it would be possible to catch them before they leave ? I have some business of vital importance with Sir Hugh Stapylton."

"You might do it ; but I would advise you not to lose an hour, for the odds are ten to one that you just miss them by a day."

Hurriedly murmuring his thanks, Sir Herbert left the club, and lost no time in making his preparations to start by the mail that same evening.

Travelling night and day, he at last reached Naples, and there had the satisfaction of finding the *Mona* lying-to in the offing. As he looked at her a sail was

being hoisted, and he saw he was not a moment too soon, for there were evident preparations being made for a start.

Chartering a boat, he offered a handsome reward if the boatmen could bring him alongside the yacht before she sailed.

On board the *Mona* there was the usual confusion consequent on putting out to sea. Sir Hugh had gone aft to get out of it all, and was leaning over the taffrail taking a farewell look at Naples.

At last he sighted a small boat pulling hard towards them.

“By Jove Meltham,” he said to his host, who at the moment joined him, “I do believe this boat is making for us. They’ve a passenger in the stern. I wonder who it is. Looks like a gentleman, but I don’t recognise him, can you?” and he handed the glass to his friend.

“Never seen him before,” Meltham affirmed; “he must have made a mistake,

or the Neapolitan wiseacres muddled the yacht's name. What a nuisance when we wanted to be off. We shall have to give him lunch, and lay-to for another three or four hours."

A few moments more, and the boat was within hail.

"Is Sir Hugh Stapylton on board?" a voice inquired.

"Certainly, here he is," Sir Hugh answered.

"I am sorry to delay you, but I must have a few minutes' conversation with you," and in a few seconds Sir Herbert stood on the yacht's deck.

"Why Mainwaring!" cried Sir Hugh, extending his hand, but the other declined to touch it.

"You must excuse me," he said, "but at the present moment I cannot clasp hands with you."

"Something unpleasant has occurred,"

thought Meltham; so, coming forward courteously, he said,

“You want to speak privately to my friend. Stapylton, go into my cabin; you will be free from interruption there, and if you want cigars, champagne, or anything, just order whatever you like.”

When they were alone, Sir Hugh waited silently for Mainwaring to speak.

“I have followed you,” he said at last, “to demand the truth about my wife.”

Sir Hugh said, as Challoner had said before him,

“From the letter you wrote me before your wedding, I thought you knew the truth.”

“There was a misapprehension between us; I was hurried into the marriage by everyone. Why did you not insist on seeing me before it took place? I thought you only referred in your letter seeking an interview, to my wife having been under

the care of those women. I never guessed there was anything further, though I own that till I heard you were her uncle I was sceptical about her family. But I never dreamed that one man would play off his illegitimate daughter on another, in the way you got rid of her by forcing her on me."

"I had nothing to do with the forcing; till this moment I thought you married her of your own free will," Sir Hugh said calmly, keeping his temper under control, as he saw how agitated and fatigued the other was. "Besides, who said Cecily was illegitimate?"

"Who could say anything else?"

"I can. Her mother is my wife, and has been for the last eighteen years."

"Your wife!"

"Yes," Sir Hugh said bitterly, "my wife, and the curse and bane of my life."

In his own trouble Mainwaring could feel something of the grief that had so long weighed down Sir Hugh, and stretching out his hand, he grasped Stapylton's, and looked into his face with an earnest sympathy that made them friends then and for all time.

"You may wonder why I don't acknowledge her," Sir Hugh said with a bitter laugh, "so I had better tell you the whole story and then we can dismiss the subject for ever," and forthwith he related the tale of his most unhappy life.

When he had come to the end, he called for some refreshment for his guest, and after a pause, asked,

"What of Cecily, how is she?" Sir Herbert coloured and looked uncomfortable, at last he said,

"I don't know, she has left me," and at once he made Sir Hugh acquainted with the story of Cecily's flight.

“And have you tried to find her?” Sir Hugh asked.

Mainwaring made a clean breast of it.

“No, I have not. When I found how I had been deceived in her, I was so furious with her, that I never attempted to find her, and was indeed glad, rather than anything else that she had left me.”

“But I don’t think Cecie did deceive you. I don’t think she knew anything at all about the matter.”

“She may not have known it all; but I am sure from her manner that she knew who her mother was.”

“But she must be found.”

“Yes now I know all, I will myself endeavour to find her; but Sir Hugh, she shall never live with me again. That shall never be, she has deceived me once, and I can never forgive her for it, nor could I trust her again. We will endeavour to

find her, and place her in comfort with some friend we can trust, but the rest of our lives must be spent apart."

"Could you never forgive her that one false step? I believe her to be deeply and devotedly attached to you; when I last saw her she spoke of you as a woman only speaks of the man she really cares for. She is so young to be punished all her life long for one offence, and—pardon me—you are very young to make yourself so stern a judge."

"No Sir Hugh, it is no use arguing the fact with me. I did not care for Cecily when I married her. I was forced into it by Mrs. D'Eyncourt; and even had Cecie proved all that a man could desire, I doubt if we should have been happy. I should always have girded at the idea of being entrapped into a marriage, when I had not enjoyed half the years of bachelorhood a man

likes to have. Now I think I must be returning to Naples. I am glad I was in time to see you, and that we have been able to explain matters so far," and rising, Mainwaring once more extended his hand.

"Good-bye," he said.

"Stay a moment," Sir Hugh said; "If Cecily is missing, there is as much necessity for me to search for her, as for you. We are I think, equally responsible for her welfare. I will speak to Meltham, and I think I had better accompany you on your return journey."

Leaving the cabin Stapylton sought his host. Poor Meltham! Once more his yachting party was broken up. When he heard that Stapylton was wishing to leave him he was very much put out.

"Of course you can't help it, my dear fellow," he said; "but it's the deuce and all. What the dickens am I to do cruising

about alone? I should drown myself by way of a change. I don't want to part with you, and I don't know what to do if you go; but I suppose you must go if you say so. Would this important business not keep a month or two?"

"I am afraid not. I really must go; but I am very sorry to disarrange your plans."

"Well, well, it can't be helped," Meltham said moodily, puffing away at his cigar, and pacing the deck.

A minute later he rejoined Sir Hugh with a beaming face.

"Stapylton, does your friend want to return to England also?"

"Yes; we shall go back together."

"Then I'll take you. I can't be left here by myself. We will go back to England together, your friend as well if he will come; we will have a few more pleasant days together, and I'll run up

to town with you from Cowes and try and make up a fresh party for a fresh start."

Thus it was arranged. Sir Herbert was quite agreeable to the idea; the boat was sent back for his baggage, and, when evening came, the *Mona* was put about, and steered her course for the white cliffs of old England.

CHAPTER XIII.

ON THE TRACK.

IN one of the best hotels in the West End three men sat chatting. Dinner was laid for four, and they were speculating how long it would be before the fourth man arrived.

“If he is not here in a few moments,” Dick Challoner opined, “it is no good waiting for him and getting everything spoiled. I shall be glad to meet the lad again for we parted in anger, and I ought to have remembered the unhappy state of mind he must have been in, and known better than to take offence at anything he might say.”

"I am particularly anxious that Herbert may come to-night," Geoffrey said quietly.

"Why? Have you any special reason?" asked Darrell D'Eyncourt eagerly.

"I think I have a special reason; but at present it is my secret. I shall not divulge it till Herbert comes. Ah, here he is," as the door was flung wide and Mainwaring entered, closely followed by Stapylton.

"I have brought Sir Hugh with me," he said.

"Sir Hugh in town! The ——!" was Challoner's muttered remark.

"Ah Challoner, how are you?" Sir Hugh said, coming to him and drawing him aside.

The two men glared at one another in silence for a moment, then Sir Hugh said hoarsely,

"This is not the time for saying what I have to say to you, Mr. Challoner."

"You can say what you please when you please," the other responded coldly.

"I hope you have been contented with dragging that woman's fair name through the mire."

"That was all I had to make me content," Challoner said.

A light shone in Sir Hugh's eyes.

"Do you mean that that telegram was all a lie; that she never was there at all?"

"I am not in the habit of telling lies, either by telegraph or in any other way."

"That is no answer. I asked you a plain question; answer it plainly. Was she there?"

"She was."

Sir Hugh gave a smothered groan.

"What right had you to entice her there?" he asked fiercely.

"Exactly the same right that you had to make yourself foolish over her. When you

were once away why did you not stay, instead of returning to spoil everything?"

"What have I spoilt by returning?" Sir Hugh asked hastily.

"Nothing," Challoner returned, afraid lest in the heat of the moment he had betrayed himself; and joining the others, he deliberately cut short the unpleasant conversation.

Sir Hugh was puzzled. He could not understand it altogether. How had he spoilt everything by returning; and what did Challoner mean by letting slip that things were not so smooth with Miss Ainsworthy as he would have had it supposed?

Sir Hugh determined to investigate this before he again left England, and then returned to the others.

"Any tidings of Cecily?" was the eagerly-asked question.

"I have none to give," Darrell said sadly.

“My search has been so far utterly fruitless. I cannot gain the slightest clue to her whereabouts. When we do find her, I expect we shall hear that she took no precautions whatever to conceal her movements; and thus completely mystified us all, and the police into the bargain, by the very simplicity of her actions.”

“And you Geoffrey?” Sir Herbert asked.

Mr. Tremayne was silent a moment, and then said quietly,

“No, I’ve no proofs for you; but here is dinner, let us eat first and talk after. I have something to tell you, but not much. Nothing I fear, of any vital importance.”

When dinner was nearly over Mr. Tremayne astonished the party by a curious request.

“Will you fellows come to the theatre to-night? I have taken a box at the ——. What do you say to it?”

Sir Herbert looked across at his brother in amazement.

“Considering the subject we were going to discuss after dinner, I am rather surprised at your suggestion Geoff,” he said.

“I don’t feel inclined for it,” Sir Hugh chimed in. “I must confess to feeling a great disinclination towards a theatre to-night. I am impatient to hear about this slight clue Tremayne seems to have lighted on.”

“What if I tell you my object in asking you to come to the —— to-night is to follow up this supposed clue?”

“Tell us more about it,” all cried.

“About a fortnight ago I was walking along the Strand, when I saw in the distance a figure much resembling Cecily’s hurrying along before me. I quickened my steps; but with the number of passengers on the pavement it was utterly impossible to overtake the girl. So after

two or three vain efforts to get nearer her, I had to content myself with following at a distance, and keeping her well in sight. By-and-by she turned up a side street, and before I had time to reach it had vanished. She was no ghost, so I felt sure she had gone into some house in the street; but as there were no shops I felt rather astonished at the quick way she had gained admittance. I strolled up the street, and a moment later the mystery was solved. I found myself abreast of the stage-door of the ——. The girl I was looking for had gone in there. I tried to follow her, but was ordered back in a peremptory manner by a surly old doorkeeper. I propitiated him with some silver, and told him I wanted to speak to the lady who had just gone in. "What was her name?" queried the wily Cerberus. I did not know, so hummed and ha'd a moment before

answering. The hesitation was quite enough. "You don't know her name," he said roughly, "and I ain't going to have no one annoyed here," and so saying he slammed the door roughly in my face, and left me to my own reflections.

"I determined to wait and watch for her. In about an hour's time the girl emerged again. The old doorkeeper must have said something about me, for she turned back after speaking to the old man, and by-and-by emerged with her face covered with so thick a veil, it seemed impossible even to guess at a single feature. Her figure was exactly like Cecily's; her height the same. I should have gone and spoken to her, but for one thing. This girl had a quantity of dark brown, almost black, hair, and Cecily's was a bright golden tinge. I followed the girl to her home, and there found that she was a Mrs. Maitland, an actress; and that

she was in lodgings in the house, with her maid. Her likeness struck me as so remarkable, that I made up my mind to hunt up this Mrs. Maitland's history. I found that she had gone on the stage about ten days after Cecily's disappearance. She had begun with little minor parts, but had showed herself so clever that the manager was giving her the heroine's part in the new play. She is to play to-night, and I want you all to see her, that you may be able to judge for yourselves whether it is Cecie or not. The likeness is certainly marvellous, but I have not been able to speak to her—to tell you the truth, I have not felt justified in accosting, and perhaps frightening a dark girl when I am in search of a fair one."

"We will all go with you as soon as we have finished dinner," Sir Hugh said, "and amongst us all we shall be able to fathom any disguise if it indeed be Cecily."

Somewhat hastily the dinner was concluded, and ere long the whole party were seated in the stage-box, waiting for the curtain to rise.

CHAPTER XIV.

FOUND.

"I WISH I had not to go on to-night, Marie," said Cecily Mainwaring languidly; "I feel so depressed to-night, that I don't feel at all equal to the effort."

"Don't go then miladi," Marie urged.

"No Marie; I should go if I were only just able to walk. You don't understand: the success of a piece depends upon the charm being kept up till its position is quite assured as a favourite with the public. Managers won't brook understudies till there is no fear of the public getting disgusted and flocking elsewhere. The piece

seems as if it would have a run, and, when it has gone for about six weeks or so, then I'll take a rest if I feel to need it; but now, while I have strength and life in me, my duty is to appear. Get me some tea, will you Marie? A good strong cup may revive me."

Cecie sat in the twilight in her little room; the fire shone brightly around, and showed how well her own good taste and Marie's loving care had transformed the modest little place into a home.

Anyone looking in from outside would have said: "What a cosy room! How I should like to live there; it looks so home-like and happy." But alas! the time had come for Cecie when pretty surroundings had lost their charm for her. Contentment had fled, and left her house desolate.

She realised fully when she learned to love her husband, how she had wronged him; and bitterly she regretted the past,

and wished it were possible that she could undo it all, and set him free.

The ground seemed to crumble under her feet as she stepped on it. The past was despair, the future hopeless, the present a round of duties that alone gave her forgetfulness, and saved her poor worn brain from reeling.

What unhappy lives some people seem to have : apparently for no cause, everything seems to go wrong with them—joy to turn to Dead-sea fruit, and nothing to flourish but sorrow.

Possibly such are in need of this severe discipline to fit them for a better life. Undoubtedly all is arranged by an all-seeing eye for an all-wise purpose ; but nevertheless it is strange that to some should be meted all the happiness, and to others all the grief.

After all, what is happiness or joy ? A vain, evanescent thing that eludes your

grasp, will-o'-the-wisp-like. If I could have such and such a thing I should be happy, says one; and when the object is gained, he finds himself not a bit happier, but stranded again—longing for something else. The greatest good is contentment—contentment with our present lot, be it what it may—a fixed determination to make the best out of our lives with whatever materials are given to us, no matter how poor they may appear. That is the only way to find happiness. Be content with the good that you have, and you find yourself happy and at peace without knowing why.

There is no person living without some beauty; no one, however plain or ugly, without some redeeming point, even if it be but in figure or manner; so there is no life, however cheerless and barren, without its oasis.

The mistake is in overlooking these

little green spots ; in saying, "Pshaw ! do you think I am going to be content with half-a-dozen blades of grass, when my soul is pining and wasting for a park ? Shall I put up with a sapling, when I desire a forest ?"

There's the mistake. The grass would increase, the sapling grow to a fine tree ; and would we but encourage these tiny green spots, we should find, before we had time to think of it, that our half-dozen blades of grass were stretching and waving around us for acres and acres ; our insignificant sapling had grown such a noble tree, that we could sit under its spreading branches, and rest, listening to the birds that made their nests and sang among its leafy arbours ; and to the giddy insects that hummed around.

The thing is to realise the golden moment, and seize it ; to know where the green spots lie, and cultivate them.

By-and-by Marie returned with the tea. Her mistress shivered as she took it from her.

“I can’t tell why,” she said; “but I have a presentiment something is going to happen. I can’t shake it off, do what I will. I have been trying to reason myself out of it all, but it’s no good.”

“The room is *triste* in this light, it has affected miladi’s spirits,” Marie returned, bustling about and lighting the gas, drawing the curtains and giving the room a few little touches here and there. “See miladi, that is more cheerful. The presentiments will fly now.”

“No, Marie, I don’t think they will. Come here, Marie; I want to talk to you.”

Marie obeyed, seating herself in the seat her mistress indicated.

“You have been a good faithful friend to me Marie,” she went on, “and I

have often thought how well you have behaved in coming into voluntary exile with me, without ever seeking to discover the reason. I have felt sure you must have wondered."

"I always felt that miladi had done what she thought best, and that was sufficient for me. I did not seek to know the reason, for I felt that did miladi wish me to know, she would tell me."

"You have been very good, and I thank you for it," Cecily said, grasping the girl's honest hand. "I have been thinking a great deal this afternoon. I could not even get my usual after-dinner nap for thinking."

"That is why you feel indisposed now then, miladi?"

"It may be; but I feel that I must tell you before I go to the theatre. I shall just have time, and if anything

happens, I should like you to have heard the truth from my own lips ; and I want to tell you for another reason. If I should only live till my child is born, I want you to be as good a friend to the child, as you have been to the mother ; and in after years, should people try to fling stones at my memory for what I have done, you will be able to clear me in my child's eyes."

"Oh, don't talk so," pleaded Marie, her tears springing forth.

"Hush," Cecily said, "I have no time to spare. If all goes well, and nothing happens to me, I shall have done no harm in telling you, and if things are the reverse way, it will be a great comfort to me to know I have told you. Don't cry, Marie. I don't want to die. When I think that ere very long I hope to feel clinging baby arms about me, I long to live. I did not want to

live till I thought of that, and now I long for the moment when I shall feel a soft, nestling thing in my arms, that will take away all my cares and pain, and bring such joy, such peace into my heart. Now, Marie listen to me carefully, and when you don't understand me tell me, and I will explain," and in a few words Cecily told the story of her having concealed her real parentage from her husband, how he had discovered it, and how she had fled to escape his anger. She did not mention who her mother was, but simply that she had been an actress, and she had told Sir Herbert differently when she married him.

With no protestations of sincerity, but with a calm manner that showed she was to be trusted, Marie, when the story was ended, gave her mistress her word to look after the babe from the hour of its birth till her own death; and then, at a sign from

her mistress, began making preparations for the start to the theatre; and at last appeared ready-dressed with Cecily's fur cloak, and close-fitting cap and veil.

"I have called a cab miladi," she said. "I thought you were already too fatigued to walk, missing your afternoon sleep and all."

They drove up in silence, alighting at the stage entrance. Marie held aside the swing door for Cecie to pass through.

"Good-evening. Any letters?" she asked of the doorkeeper.

"No, ma'am; not to-night. A parcel came for you, which I sent to your dressing-room. But two gentlemen came to-day and asked for your address."

"My address! What did you say?" she asked quickly.

"I asked who they was, and as they seemed to hesitate, I told them I wasn't allowed to give none of the ladies' addresses.

Then one says he was your brother, and you was expecting him. So I says, 'That won't do,' I says. 'Mrs. Maitland is a very particular lady, and don't like people a followin' her.' So I says, 'If you really are her brother, and wants to see her,' I says, 'I'll call the manager; he happens to be in just now, and he can use his own discretion about giving you the address. I'm forbid to, and should lose my place if I did,' I says. So with that they laughed, and said they would not be after troubling the manager; but would call again this evening when you was here. So I told them if they did they would have to wait till the performance was over, and then, if they came inside of the door, they'd have to see the manager afore they could see you, as he would not have his ladies worried. So they says something about a dooce of a lot of trouble, and away they went; and half-

an-hour after comes the parcel, which it is my belief is flowers, from these same young gentlemen."

"You're a very good fellow to have been so firm about it," Cecie said, putting a shilling into his hand.

"Only my duty, ma'am ; only my duty," he answered as he pocketed the *douceur* he had expected.

Along a dark passage, with one side open to the under part of the stage, and looking a perfect chaos of beams, supports, ropes, and pulleys, up a rickety flight of stairs and across the back of the stage went Cecie ; getting little or no respect paid her by the busy scene-shifters and carpenters who were getting the scenery ready to set, the moment that—as a rule—odious exhibition of romping and vulgarity—the farce—was over.

Down at the wings to the opposite prompt to have a peep at the farce, see

how far it had gone and calculate how much time she had to dress, then up the stage again, pausing a moment to speak to the prompter while he worked the rain—split peas in an iron cylinder—and then down a tiny, narrow, dark staircase to her dressing-room, where Marie had already laid out the first dress, spread the toilet, arranged the “make-up,” and was waiting orders.

I wonder whether the general public have any idea of the dens from which the brotherhood of the sock and buskin issue forth to their nightly triumphs, so perfectly dressed, so fresh and trim in appearance.

Many people I daresay, if they think at all, fancy they are comfortable rooms, like one's own bed-room. They would be rather *désillusionné* could they look into half the theatres and see the tiny, dirty, comfortless, badly-ventilated rooms, from

which the talent issues forth which brings grist to the manager's mill.

The only comfort to be found in dressing-rooms is that they are well lighted. Ninetenths of them have no carpet, or an apology for one. A broad dresser or shelf running all the way round; a washhand-basin and jug propped on a corner of the dresser, a chair, and, in the case of the leading lady, a large looking-glass, and the furniture of the room is complete. Very little for use, and nothing for ornament, does a dressing-room contain. It certainly seems strange that the people who bring all the money to the house should have their comfort so utterly disregarded, and when they come off the stage, perhaps a little exhausted with their efforts, they should have no better place to go and re-invigorate themselves for their next entrance, but a tiny cupboard with two or three gases flaring

away, and often no window or outlet of any description to let off the bad air.

The green-room is often dirtier and more comfortless than the dressing-rooms, and in many theatres converted into a kind of extra property-room, and half filled with lumber.

Of course there are exceptions to every rule, but the green-room and dressing-rooms described would answer for more than two-thirds of the theatres in the kingdom.

Cecie had no need to hurry, for she did not make her appearance till nearly the end of the first scene. At last she was at the side waiting for her cue, and Marie with her, holding a looking-glass, puff, and a glass with Liebig in it, which Cecie sipped each time she came off.

At last her cue came, and Marie having taken the shawl in which she was wrapped,

and given one final touch to her dress, she stepped forth on to the stage.

The occupants of the stage-box had been waiting impatiently for Mrs. Maitland to appear, but even when she did, and after the burst of applause which greeted her entrance had subsided, and they had time to look at her, they could not say positively that it was Cecie. The dark hair had changed her utterly, and completely baffled them.

The figure and the expression when she smiled seemed like Cecily; and yet there was a tone in the voice, a look on the face in repose, that were certainly not Cecily's. Both tone and look had come to her in her days of sorrow and remorse since she left her home; no wonder they were new to them.

Challoner had declined to come, saying he did not know Lady Mainwaring well enough to recognise her, so there were

only the four men in the box. Sir Herbert—her own husband—could not identify her, and they sat silently watching for some sign which would make them certain.

Mrs. Maitland seemed far more lovely than Cecily Mainwaring; her beauty was so *spirituelle*, and Cecily had always been of the robust, healthy type, though always of refined style.

Her acting was superb, she held the house by a magnetic chain; from the moment she entered till the end of the first act there was a breathless stillness, only broken by some well-merited applause for one or other of the players; but when the curtain fell on the act, there arose a mighty clamour, such a call for Mrs. Maitland as might well have stirred an older heart with pleasurable pride.

Smiling and bowing she came forward, showing in her face the pleasure she felt; but instead of crossing the stage, she merely

bowed and withdrew again, thereby saving passing close before the stage-box in which sat her husband.

“Was that design, do you think?” Sir Herbert asked.

“No, I think not,” Geoffrey replied. “She must have been tired with that last little bit, and spared herself any extra bit of walking.”

It was indeed so. Notwithstanding Mr. Wilmore assuring her she was excelling herself, Cecie felt as though it were impossible to continue. She had not noticed the occupants of the stage-box; her heart was thoroughly in her work, and besides she felt too ill to look about, even had she been inclined.

The curtain rose again, the piece progressed, and concluded without any one of the four men having come to a definite conclusion. They dared not go to the

stage-door and wait for her coming out, in case it should not be Cecily after all.

There was another call for Mrs. Maitland as the curtain fell on the last act. It was not responded to. A few seconds elapsed, and the applause and cries got louder and more imperative. The curtain quivered, moved, was pushed aside, and Cecie, pale and trembling, appeared before the audience.

She seemed exhausted, and leaned heavily on her conductor. She moved slowly across the stage, trying her best to smile and appear at her ease. As she neared their box something at last struck Sir Herbert. He felt convinced it was she, and starting to his feet, leaned far out of the box to look at her.

The sudden movement attracted Mrs. Maitland's attention. She looked towards the box, and stood for one moment gazing

straight into the eyes of her husband. Then with a cry she sank down senseless.

A swift movement, a leap, and a gentleman from the stage-box alighted on the stage, and lifting her tenderly in his arms, bore her away.

It was Sir Herbert.

CHAPTER XV.

PEACE.

MISS AINSWORTHY was reading in her sanctum. Her shapely figure was folded in a soft delicate-tinted dressing-gown, that fell around her in graceful flowing curves, her long brown hair unbound and falling over her shoulders.

As she sat back in her chair, the strong light of the reading-lamp falling full on her face, showed how severely the last few months had tried her. The fine eyes wore a pained expression, a mute appeal for sympathy, such as one sees in the clear sad eyes of a dog. The whole face had a

graver look than of yore, and in place of its usual calm serenity, a look of deep-seated pain.

All the household were in bed. Miss Ainsworthy might stay up reading to what hour she pleased; but everyone else, from the head mistress to the kitchenmaid, must retire when eleven struck, or she would know the reason why; and Mabel Ainsworthy was a woman who would not be lightly disobeyed, and for all her pleasantness could administer a good sound scolding when occasion demanded.

It was past twelve, when suddenly her reading was broken in upon by the clanging of the door-bell. She was not a woman who cared in the least for midnight alarms. She just glanced up from her book.

“A run-away ring,” she thought, and went on with her reading.

Another peal of the bell, louder this time.

“The policeman! Those stupid servants have left a window open,” and leaving her room, she crossed the hall to the street-door.

A man’s shadow fell across the glass at the side of the door; the hat was an ordinary one, not a policeman’s helmet. Miss Ainsworthy thought it behoved her to be cautious, so returning to her room she rang a bell that was hung in her maid’s room, just over her bed, which never failed to wake her, and then went back to the street-door, which she unbolted and opened on the chain.

“Who’s there?” she asked.

The man standing on the steps called out in agitated tones,

“Does Miss Ainsworthy live here?”

“Yes, I am Miss Ainsworthy; what do you want with me at this time of night?”

“Open the door, and let me speak to you.”

"Most certainly not. Tell me your business, and I will let you in."

"I cannot tell you my business standing here."

"Then wait a few minutes," Mabel said quietly, and shutting the door, went to the foot of the stairs, and met the maid descending, looking half-dazed, half-asleep, holding her lamp—which was happily one of the safety benzolines—upside down.

"Go and call James, and be quick. Tell him to come here; there's a man at the front-door who wants to come in."

Off flew the maid, wide awake now, and only too thankful to get out of the hall, lest the man—who could be no one but a murderer—should squeeze himself through the keyhole and devour her.

In two minutes up came James, looking sleepy and cross; behind him the page, mouth and ears wide open, yearning for

something horrible to happen ; and, in the extreme background at vanishing point, the maid, her lamp dimly showing her frightened face.

“Now go and open the door.”

James obeyed. He would have liked to grumble had he dared, but was obliged to suppress his wrath at the moment, though doubtless he pommelled the page when safely out of his mistress' sight.

The man on the doorstep, tired of waiting, rushed precipitately into the hall, towards Miss Ainsworthy ; the maid shrieked, the page gave a whoop of delicious anticipation, and James, delighted to be able to vent his ill-temper on somebody, swung round and collared the intruder.

“Here, don't do that. Miss Ainsworthy, I am Geoffrey Tremayne, Herbert Mainwaring's brother. Will you come to Cecie ? We fear she is dying.”

"She is found then?" Mabel exclaimed, forgetful of the presence of the servants.

"Yes. Can I speak to you privately?"

"Come into this room. Bring some wine and biscuits, James. Louise, get my things ready to go with this gentleman. I will come to you in a moment; and you Charles, go to bed this minute. What do you mean by coming upstairs when you were not called? Go to bed at once, and don't let me see you again to-night."

The page disappeared precipitately, horribly disgusted at the tame turn affairs had taken; and James and Louise departed on their errands.

Miss Ainsworthy turned back into her sanctum; and in a few hurried words Mr. Tremayne told her the story of the finding of Cecie, and how she had been so long before she recovered from the fainting fit, and that when they got her home she

seemed so terribly ill they sent for a doctor; that he shook his head and looked grave, and they all feared she was dying. She had been asking for Miss Ainsworthy, and Geoffrey begged her to be quick and accompany him. His cab was a few doors farther up, as he had a difficulty in finding the right number.

Leaving him while she hurried away to dress, Mabel soon returned ready for the start, and with all possible speed they hastened back to Cecily's rooms.

As she passed through the sitting-room, Mabel was only conscious of seeing several gentlemen there, but did not recognise anyone, as Marie hurried her into the bed-room, closing the door behind her.

To the watchers in the sitting-room the time seemed interminable. The second doctor Sir Herbert had sent for, arrived, and was ushered into the silent room. Another long, long interval, and at last

as the clock was on the stroke of four, the door of communication opened, and Marie's tear-stained face appeared. Beckoning Sir Herbert she laid a bundle gently in his arms, and stood by weeping silently.

Sir Herbert looked wonderingly at the roll of flannel, as though uncertain what it could be; till Marie opened the folds, and showed him a tiny, frail little form, from which as the light touched its eyes, a faint wail emanated.

Tears were in his eyes as he gazed at the tiny thing, and the others gathered round him.

"A little heir Sir Herbert," was all Marie could say.

"The mother?" he asked. Ere Marie could answer, a gentle hand was laid on his arm, and Mabel's kind voice said,

"You must take this little life for hers, and cherish it for her sake."

“She is not——” he stammered, turning ghastly pale, and trembling so much, that Marie hastily took the precious bundle from him.

“No,” Mabel answered, “but, I entreat you be calm—she cannot live through the night, she knows you are here, and has been asking for you. Go to her; but I beg you to control yourself, else you will excite her, and the poor child may be taken from you without the forgiveness for which she craves.”

Slowly he entered the chamber of death, softly he closed the door, and approached the bed whereon lay the wife he had never loved.

Over that parting scene a veil should be drawn; but when later on the others were one by one admitted, there was a smile of radiant happiness on Cecie’s worn face, which was faintly reflected on Sir Herbert’s, as he sat beside her, holding

in his arms the tiny life she had given him.

Then Geoffrey Tremayne went to call Sir Hugh; he had begged earnestly that she might know him before she died.

Miss Ainsworthy met him at the door as he entered; a silent look of recognition was all they gave, and Sir Hugh passed on and stood beside the bed.

He waited silently till Cecie became conscious of another presence, and taking her eyes from her husband's face, gazed at him steadfastly a moment, and then said faintly, trying to smile at him,

“Uncle Hugh!”

He knelt beside her, and, taking her hand, said gently,

“Not Uncle Hugh, my child. Call me once by my right name—Father.”

Cecie half-raised herself, and looked intently at him.

“Tell me. My mother—was not Aunt Helen?”

“Yes, my child. Aunt Helen is your mother, and my wife.”

“Thank God,” she murmured faintly. “I feared so much—now I am so happy. Kiss me, my father,” and she lay back once more on her pillows, her eyes wandering to their old resting-place — her husband’s face.

Sir Hugh never forgot the smile of happiness that spread over Cecie’s face as she whispered the word so sweet to him—
“Father.”

Another hour and all was over ; husband and wife had but been united to part once more ; but on Sir Herbert’s face a new light was shining as he clasped the infant in his arms, and turned sadly from the room of death. In his heart there was a prayer for strength to guide and guard

rightly the young life entrusted to him, and to cherish it as entirely as he had neglected her who had given it him ; and in after years this silent heart-prayer bore noble fruit.

The sun was high in the heavens when Mabel Ainsworthy, pale and haggard from her long night's watching, prepared to leave the house.

She had hardly given a thought to Sir Hugh ; the time was not one for thoughts of self, but now that there was nothing more to be done, the old pain came gnawing at her heart again.

Why had he gone away and made no sign ?

Now, as she turned into the street, she heard someone follow her quickly, and looking up with the intention of saying something civil about not needing an escort, she met Sir Hugh's deep earnest eyes fixed on her.

“Mabel!” he said.

A dead faintness came over her, try as she would she could not speak to him, could not meet his eyes.

He on his side had been doubting all, when he saw her moving about so deftly and quietly, a veritable ministering angel. Doubting all, and saying in his heart that it could not have been true what Challoner affirmed; that this one—of all women, was pure and true. He thought when he could speak to her and gaze into her face he should read the truth; and now, when she trembled and paled before him, and could not meet his eyes, he took it for a sign of guilt, that, having vowed to be faithful to him even though they were parted, she was afraid to meet him, ashamed to look him in the face.

“I had hoped never to have seen you more,” he went on sternly, “never again to look on the false face that has shattered

all the new found faith I had in women. Having met—for the memory of the past, I could not let you go without a word ; but I tell you I now bid you good-bye for ever, without regret, and yet when I saw you again to-night I felt I must clasp your hand once more. And now,” taking her passive hand in his, “good-bye for ever.”

He paused, waiting, hoping, fearing, longing for her to speak. She seemed for a moment as though she would have fallen to the ground, but with a great effort controlling herself, pointed to a passing cab, saying only,

“That cab.”

Sir Hugh called and having placed her in it, would have moved away ; but she made a gesture to him to stop, and leaning forward said in low, husky tones,

“Have you been to your chambers yet ?”

He waited a moment, angry with her for asking such a trivial question ; and then,

fancying he saw her drift, and that she had sent a letter there trying to explain and smooth things away, he said harshly,

“No, I am going there this morning; but the letter I shall find there can make not the slightest difference in our relations. I know all, and what the letter contains also.”

“Then may Heaven help me,” she said, falling back in the corner; and as the cab drove rapidly away, he caught sight of a white despairing face.

Her words haunted him as he strode away back to the hotel. The look in her eyes kept coming back to him, do what he would. And then that cry of hers!

What did she mean? It must be more than a plea for forgiveness, and yet what else could it be? He half made up his mind not to go near his chambers to fetch the letter, arguing that if she looked on it as of such importance, it must be one that

she had expended all her energies over in the writing, and which would most probably make him very uncomfortable if he did read it.

No, he would not go. And then back came her words and her look. He could stand it no longer; he would call at the chambers on his way to the hotel, get the letter, and take it back with him to read when he was rested; and then he would be at rest, and find out for himself if there was anything out of the ordinary in that haunting tone and look, or if he only noticed it from being tired out.

CHAPTER XVI.

LIKE CÆSAR'S WIFE.

WHAT a comfortable thing it would be for many of us if, in our times of great affliction, we could only follow the example of heroines in fiction, and gain oblivion for the time of all that was going on around.

“Enter Tilburina, mad—in white satin—
enter her maid, mad—in white linen—”

What a pleasant thing to be able to give way utterly, and ramp about, and rave, and twine straw in your hair, and refuse to eat. Half the pain in these latter enlightened days is the keeping it in, hiding the grief to prevent yourself being too offensive to your unhappy relations.

To let

Concealment,
Like the worm i' the bud,
Feed on the damask cheek.

That is the hard task. To go about as though nothing had happened, with your heart hot within you and wrung with anguish, and scalding tears ready to gush forth, if only they dare be let flow.

This was Mabel Ainsworthy's case. The morning's routine had to be gone through, and she must appear the calm, serene mistress in the eyes of her pupils.

She longed to take the rest she so much needed, but dared not, knowing well the haunting demons that would seize her for their prey the moment her door was closed on the world, and she was alone and in their power.

At last there was no further excuse for her to linger in the schoolroom, and she was forced to go to her own room.

She sat down at her writing-table, her white hands lying listless and idle in her lap, her eyes fixed on vacancy, and her thoughts so far away that she never heard the unclosing of the door, or noticed the entrance of Sir Hugh Stapylton.

He stood a moment gazing at her, at the white face, the heavy rings round the eyes, and then said softly,

“Mabel!”

“Who spoke?” she cried, starting to her feet, trembling.

Then, as he approached her, she drew herself to her full height, and with all the proud passionate blood of her race mantling in her cheek, she said,

“I should have thought Sir Hugh, that after our conversation of the morning, a visit from you was superfluous.”

“I have come to you because of this;” he said quietly, laying before her the letter she had written that memorable,

miserable day after her return from Westham. "I despise myself for coming, and yet, if it were possible that anything could restore my happiness—I have suffered too much to let this letter pass unheeded."

He spoke brokenly. He did indeed despise himself for going near her after all that had happened, and yet he had a lurking hope that she might possibly be able to give some explanation of that abominable telegram. For to that matter only did he fancy the letter alluded.

Challoner's words of the night before had struck him strangely. What did he mean by "returning to spoil everything," and that scandalising was all he had had to "content him"? There was evidently something more in the whole matter than he had at first thought; and when, after the meeting with Mabel he had fetched her letter from his chambers and perused it, the hope grew up in his heart that

after all she might be able to offer some explanation, particularly, when he saw the date on her letter was about the same time as the date of his leaving England. He neither trusted Challoner, nor believed all he said, he remembered the past; but still he also remembered how Challoner had vowed to have his revenge, when at that time long ago, he had foiled him.

He remained for some hours in a state of indecision, and at last called a hansom and drove to Miss Ainsworthy's to do his best to sift the matter through.

Mabel broke the silence that had lasted several painful minutes.

"I wonder," she said bitingly, "that so proud a man as you, should condescend to take his release from the hands of a woman he has not scrupled to insult a few hours back."

"Take my release!" he answered

wondering ; “ I don’t understand you. If you will, you can relieve my mind of the bitter burden it has borne these last few weeks.”

“ Has it only galled you then for a few weeks ? I thought I could release you from the bondage of years.”

He advanced a step towards her, a light springing in his eyes.

“ Tell me——” he began ; but she silenced him with a gesture, and going to her writing-table, unlocked a drawer, and after a few moments’ search, drew out a small packet of letters. These she placed in his hands, saying quietly,

“ It was to give you these that I wrote the letter summoning you here ; now, I think, all further conversation is unnecessary, and——” she waved towards the door.

He took up his hat, gazing curiously at the packet of letters in his hand.

“I don’t understand how these can concern me?” he asked, seeing they were addressed to Richard Challoner.

“They concern you so far that, it seems to me, they render you a free man.”

“What?” he cried, and setting down his hat, regardless of her intimation, he murmured hurriedly: “With your permission,” and, drawing one of the letters from its cover, read it though. Then he took the next and the next, till he had mastered them all; but his hands were trembling so, he could hardly hold the paper.

He looked up at her at last, all else forgotten in the gladness of the moment.

“Mabel!” he cried, “do you understand these? Do you know you have restored my happiness to me—freed me from the curse I have so long borne? Tell me, do you understand it all?”

“Only partly.”

“Let me tell you then. See, these letters are from an Italian addressed to Challoner, evidently thinking that he was the husband of Ada Wilmot—Maud FitzAlleyn—offering to rid him of his wife for a handsome consideration. From the next letter it would appear Challoner had told him Ada Wilmot was not his wife, but offered twenty pounds for the secret, and the Italian indignantly refuses such a small sum. There is a lapse of three months between the next letter. I daresay the man tried to find the real husband and failed. He seems in poverty by his manner of writing. Do you see, Challoner may have the secret for fifty pounds; and Challoner evidently gives it, for here is a receipt attached to this document—the one which restores to me life, youth, and hope. It certifies that Ada Wilmot was married to Luigi Fratelli, March 17th, 1856, and, as she was not married to me till October, 1862, and

these letters to Challoner were written in 1866, Ada Wilmot is no more my wife than she is Challoner's. These papers are a copy of the certificate of her marriage to Fratelli; and here—what's this? oh, a certificate of Fratelli's death in 1869. This, then, explains the last letter, written March, 1869, in which he says he is starving, and asks Challoner for money. He evidently did starve, from the certificate. Challoner must have seen his case in the paper, and obtained the certificate. And he has known this fourteen years, and never told me! That I can understand, though I never fancied he was such a scoundrel as this proves him, though I knew him to be thoroughly unprincipled. He has always hated me, because I foiled him. We were both in love with Ada Wilmot. I believed her to be pure, good woman; and when one day I overheard Challoner arranging to carry her off

from the theatre I was furious, and seeking her, demanded an explanation. She wept and implored me to protect her from him ; and I, believing her to be all she appeared, resolved to be champion, at the same time make Challoner ridiculous. I told one or two fellows about it, and got them to assist me. Enlisting the doorkeeper of the theatre she was at—on our side, we smuggled a slim young fellow about Ada Wilmot's height in at the stage-door ; wrapped him in the skirt and long cloak she usually wore, and, with a wig and her hat on, he really did not look unlike her. Challoner was waiting outside, and seeing the familiar cloak and hat thought it was Ada Wilmot, and, bowing, offered to take her home in his brougham ; without a word the supposed Ada stepped in, and the coachman, who was one of my own servants, drove rapidly off to an hotel, where all the men who were in the plot were waiting

for him. His rage was boundless when, the wig and cloak being thrown aside, he saw what a fool he had been made; and when an hour later, after seeing Ada Wilmot safe to her lodgings, I joined them, he swore he would be even with me. Challoner is a man who never forgives being made ridiculous. The end soon followed. I suppose, acting by his advice, Ada Wilmot declared I had compromised her, and wept and wailed till I married her, and now—all the misery has rolled away like a horrid dream, and I am free.”

All seemed forgotten in the moment's happiness. Mabel stretched out her hands and clasping his, said fervently,

“Oh Hugh! I am so glad, so glad.”

He moved as though he would have taken her in his arms, then suddenly drew back and paced the room rapidly; at last he came and stood beside her, his face stern and gloomy.

“Mabel,” he said constrainedly, “I hardly know in what terms to couch my gratitude to you for the great service you have done me. The proofs lie here before me that Ada Wilmot is not my wife, I will see that they are substantiated, but I feel it my duty to ask you now to be my wife.”

With a start, she remembered the scene of the morning.

“This morning you called me false, and now you ask me to be your wife. You have thought fit to doubt me, and we are parted for ever,” she said proudly.

“You say that as calmly as though it would not pain you in the least.”

“Why should it?”

“If not, why did you sell yourself to gain these?” he said, touching the pile of papers on the table.

“I do not understand you.”

“Mabel, you can’t deceive me now.

Remember I know all, everything, and holding this knowledge, I yet ask you to be my wife; though not as I once hoped to do, happy in the thought of your truth and fidelity—even to me, who had deceived you.”

“What can you mean?” Miss Ainsworthy asked, her face ashen white.

“Oh Mabel! why do you thus fence with me. If we are ever to be more to each other, I beg you to drop this acting, acknowledge what you cannot deny, and then let us forget the past. I ask you again to be my wife. I cannot offer you my love; that you have forfeited.”

“Why, why!” she asks passionately; then adds, “Was your thralldom then so sweet to you, that you speak to me thus for freeing you? I, who have waited and watched hour by hour for your return, and grieved at the cruel silence I could not understand. Is it to me you

say, 'I ask you to be my wife as the reward you were scheming for'? Do you think I would accept you on such terms? The time you have been abroad has made you forget me strangely."

"Would to God it had effaced the memory of your perfidy."

"My perfidy! I do not understand you in the least."

"You soon shall," he said, coming close to her, and laying his hand on her arm; "you are trying to discover how much I know, I tell you I know *all*."

"And what is that 'all'?" she asked, her lips curling.

"The means by which you obtained these papers."

Her face flushed, and then paled, and her lips trembled as she said the one word,

"Well!"

For answer, he drew from his pocket

the telegram that had crushed out all his happiness, the message from Richard Challoner :

“Sorry can’t dine with you to-morrow, as Mabel A—— is here. This between ourselves.”

Mabel read it through with dilated eyes.

“It is false,” she said, “cruelly, wickedly false.”

“I wish I could think so,” he said, fervently.

“Was it this that caused you to go away without one word?”

“This, and this only.”

“It is not true, indeed ; it is false from beginning to end.”

“Give me proof ; tell me you never were at Westham, that you did not get these papers from Challoner.”

Mabel paused, and then said firmly,

“I cannot. I was there, and I did get

the papers from Challoner ; but yet this is not true."

"All you say but tends to verify it," he said coldly. "You were at Westham, you did get the papers from him ; to me this telegram seems true enough."

Miss Ainsworthy paced the room slowly and thoughtfully. Sir Hugh flung himself into a chair, and looking at her, and watching the queenly grace of her movements, wished he could believe her.

Suddenly she stopped in her walk, and going over to him, stood for one moment looking intently in his face ; then, dropping on her knees beside him, clasped his hands in hers, and said in low, earnest tones,

"Oh Hugh, is it possible that you think I could do this thing ? I can give you no proof but my word—the word of a woman who has never lied. Will you not believe me ? You know—you must know how I

love you ; can you think for one moment I could care for another ? ”

“ Mabel, if you could only tell me you did not go there with him,” he said, raising her, and placing her in the chair. Then he broke forth, “ Darling, no matter what the truth is, I cannot shut you out of my life. My heart is wrung with the thought that you are not the pure-minded woman I worshipped, and yet at this moment I love you more madly than ever.”

He folded her in his arms, and drew her head on to his shoulder. There was a long silence broken at last by his murmuring,

“ Mabel let us forget the past, and be happy in the future.”

“ No Hugh,” she answered softly, “ here in the shelter of your arms, with my head on your breast, I feel that I can tell you all. Richard Challoner sent me a telegram,

saying you were ill at Westham—dying, I feared. Without a thought of there being any foul play, I started off, to find that you had never been near the place, and that it was all a cruel trick of his to part us. Nothing but the thought of you being dangerously ill would have made me obey a summons from Richard Challoner. When I found it all out I was furious, and—dear one, I have said I would tell you all—he did speak of love to me. You know how I would reply. Then he spoke of my love for you, and at last told me about those papers. He told me he had them with him, and that, if I chose, he would give them to me. Darling, forgive me, but then for your sake I appeared to listen to him; for your sake I suffered his hateful lips to touch mine. Oh, don't shrink from me Hugh! it was so hard to endure that I was punished enough. And then, feeling quite content, he left me

to order some dinner, and I stole the letters and fled."

There was silence, she rested in his arms waiting for some sign from him, but none came. At last she raised her head and looked into his face. It was stern and cold.

"Oh Hugh, do you not believe me!"

"I am trying to."

"Only trying to!"

Her face grew white again, the flush of hope had died away, she withdrew herself from his arms. He tried to restrain her.

"Let us forget it all. Be my wife, and let the past be the past," he said.

"No Hugh, never. So long as there is a doubt of me in your mind I will never be your wife. I see you have so little faith in me that you cannot even believe my word; so the only thing to do is to say good-bye—for ever. There could be

no happiness for me unless I knew you trusted me. I have given you all my love, Hugh, and in return I must have all yours, or nothing."

"You have all my love," he answered.

"All your love, maybe; but not your faith, nor your respect. Hugh, there are three kinds of love that must go together to make the one perfect love that alone is worth having. The love of the eye, the heart, and the mind. Two of these are mine, but ere I accept one I must have the entire trinity. Can you tell me that your mind, your nobler self, does not shrink from a union with a woman you distrust, and cannot honour? I would rather die than hang such a millstone round your neck, as such a marriage would be."

"Mabel," he cried, "I cannot, will not be parted from you, only let me be with you and I will believe anything."

“You insult me, Hugh,” she said gently. “Till I can prove what I have told you, we must never voluntarily meet. Your love for me shall never become the base passion you would degrade it to. When I can prove to you that I am blameless, will be the time for you to speak of love.”

“Are there no proofs?” he asked, despairingly.

“None,” she answered. “Stay, I remember I wrote to you the moment I returned to this house. Where is the letter? it may be of some use to us. I will not send for James, or he could tell you about taking the letter to the club that very evening, nor for the maid who travelled down with me. The proof must be found without letting the servants into all our most private matters.”

Sir Hugh fetched the letter from amongst the papers on the table.

"No," he said, scanning it, "this is no help to us, there is not the slightest mention in it of Challoner or Westham."

Mabel took it from him. Suddenly her face lighted up.

"Give me the telegram," she said, with trembling eagerness. After looking at it a moment, she said: "Here is a proof, Hugh. Look at this. The telegram was sent out at 6 P.M., and here on my letter is Wednesday, 16th, 6.30 P.M. The dates are the same are they not?"

"Yes," he answered.

"Then there is plenty of proof if you will but receive it. Half-an-hour after that telegram was sent out, I was in my own house writing this very letter to you."

There was a silence, a deep, long silence; then from Sir Hugh came the one word,

"Forgive."

And from Mabel, as she laid her hands
in his, only a low murmur of,

“Dearest, I forgive you freely; had
you not loved me as deeply, you would
not have felt thus strongly.”

L'ENVOI.

A FEW days later Maud FitzAlleyn, seated working in the garden of the pretty little French town of X——, saw Lyn coming towards her with a letter.

“From Hugh,” she said, “shall I read it to you?” and as Maud acquiesced, she broke the seal and read:

“I have at last discovered everything, and know the disgraceful deception practised upon me for so many years. Be thankful that I do not intend punishing you as you so richly deserve. For

the future I will not render you the slightest assistance ; from this moment you pass out of my life, and more especially so, as, from your plots, you have removed the only being who could have softened me towards you. Cecily Mainwaring is dead ; killed by you as surely as though your hand had done the deed.

“HUGH STAPYLTON.”

Au reste. Dick Challoner wisely went abroad and kept out of the way till Sir Hugh was married, and he hoped his anger would be softened in his new-found happiness. Sir Hugh, out of the fulness of his joy, forgave him, so Dick goes on sinning and smiling, and will continue to do so while he has a limb above ground. After Louise's marriage with Darrell D'Eyncourt, he felt all responsibilities removed from his shoulders, and I believe grows younger daily.

Mrs. D'Eyncourt and Mabel are great friends, and Mabel is one of the happiest women in town, and her house the most popular; so much so, that the arch plotters, Mrs. Waed, Mrs. Treholme, and Mrs. Challoner, are very glad that after all, their machinations came to nothing.

THE END.







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